

Can we skip to the Good Part?

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by [orphan_account](#)

Summary

Hua Cheng finds someone in the Burial Mounds while on one of his visits. It isn't a ghost, nor a body, nor demon, nor spirit. What he finds is a human. Someone half buried in the mud, bones cradling this limp body. Perhaps he was bored, or he had simply grown soft, like Xie Lian said.

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Hua Cheng clicked his tongue. Wei Wuxian? That must be his name. He seemed to be absorbing the darkness, but humans were naturally weak to resentful energy.

He would live about three days, at most.

“Don’t look at me like that, gege would be so disappointed if I didn’t even give him a chance.” Hua Cheng huffed indignantly, facing some of the soldiers’ ghosts. “All of you are beyond saving now, but I can still send you off.”

Again, most of the ghosts chose to stay. Only a few ghost fires followed him, crowding under his scarlet umbrella as Hua Cheng turned from the battered body.

“Goodbye, Wei Wuxian. I don’t know if I’ll see you again.”

Behind him, blood rain continued pouring, but nothing touched Wei Wuxian. It was a small mercy, but it was one that Hua Cheng could grant.

Notes

Hi! So this is an idea that I've been playing with for a while, and a post on tumblr convinced me to write it. This might be the main project, with that mermaid au being a back burner fic. Who knows, maybe that will change since I've ingested tgcf, svsss and mdzs, so perhaps... ahhh, that's too early, but this fic will take priority!

See the end of the work for [more notes](#)

Chapter 1

The first thing Hua Cheng noticed was the screams.

It was nothing like Ghost City, where the cheerful screams and cries were simply a way for vendors to hawk their wares.

No, these were hateful, full of violent words and vicious curses. And there was something—or someone—in the centre of all this vitriol.

He was a ghost king, and the ruler of the land. It was a simple enough task to whisper a command, and the ghosts obeyed. Hua Cheng blinked.

It was a human. Badly battered, injured, and on the brink of death, but a human, nonetheless. What was a human doing in Yiling's Burial Mounds? Most ghosts and demons avoided this place, but... no, there had to be an explanation.

Hua Cheng adjusted his umbrella and crouched down, making sure to shield the man from the blood rain that poured from the heavens. He looked about... twenty, maybe younger. Hua Cheng had long lost the ability to tell age simply by looking. Never judge a book by its cover, after all.

The ghosts swirled around him, hissing at the limp body.

Murderer.

Revenge.

Wei Wuxian... take revenge.

Kill them.

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Behind him, blood rain continued pouring, but nothing touched Wei Wuxian. It was a small mercy, but it was one that Hua Cheng could grant.

The next day, the body was gone. Not gone, exactly— there was still a depression where the body had once lain— but it was enough to tell Hua Cheng that his gamble had paid off.

Wei Wuxian had survived, though it was currently unknown if he was dead or alive. His body moving around meant little in Yiling's Burial Mounds, seeing as the resentful energy would often puppet half rotted bodies around before they started to fall apart. Some sort of sick fascination with wanting to be human again, he supposed.

The quiet footsteps drew his attention, and Hua Cheng turned, looking down at the bedraggled figure before him.

Wei Wuxian was in terrible shape. Hua Cheng could tell that the only reason he was standing right now was due to a combination of rage, fear, and resentful energy keeping his body intact. But anyone could clearly see how his hands trembled on the bamboo cane, and how his breaths came heavy and laboured.

Hm. The blood rain was probably not helping matters, but Hua Cheng simply willed the blood away from Wei Wuxian.

“Well. You’re alive.” Hua Cheng observed. “Are you going to be alive for long?”

“I... have to. I have to kill him.”

Intrigued, Hua Cheng pressed on. “Who?”

“Wen Chao.” The name was said in a low snarl, and Hua Cheng recognised the look in Wei Wuxian's eyes. It was the same look he'd seen in He Xuan's eyes up until recently, when he'd gotten close to that Wind Master.

Wei Wuxian was on the path of revenge.

“Not in that state.” Hua Cheng clicked his tongue, looking the other man up and down. “I hope you can survive here, in Yiling's Burial Mounds.”

To his utter surprise, Wei Wuxian laughed, waving away his concern.

“You needn't bother. I've got a few tricks up my sleeve. So if you have better places to be, then please, by all means.”

Hua Cheng arched an eyebrow. Wuxian had some sort of means to survive? A duration of three days was already impressive enough, let alone considering long term residence here.

But then again... the resentful energy clinging to Wei Wuxian seemed to be different, somehow. And once again, Hua Cheng decides to bet on this eccentric man.

“What about a bet?”

“A bet?” Wei Wuxian asked, still suspicious. “And can you turn off this blood rain? It's getting annoying.”

“Who said I was controlling the rain?”

“It started when I saw you appear. What bet?”

“Simple.” Hua Cheng produced a set of blood red dice, stopping the rain with a simple thought. “You roll the dice, and the number that appears will be the number of days you won’t see me for.”

“That’s it?” Wei Wuxian was incredulous. “That’s not a bet. It’s just a game of chance.”

“Well? If you’re going to stay in a burial mound, may I ask: what will you be eating?”

Wei Wuxian stiffened, then grabbed the dice and tossed them into the mud. He turned away, but not before glaring at Hua Cheng.

“I’ll figure it out myself. I can’t trust anyone right now, especially not someone wearing the colours of the Wen Clan.”

Hua Cheng watched the man stalk away, amusement bubbling in his chest. Oh, this was wonderful. He looked down at the dice.

Six in total. Well, this man’s luck was average.

“See you in six days, Wei Wuxian.”

Hua Cheng smiles, tossing his own set of dice and transporting himself back to Ghost City. There wasn’t much for him to do, really, so he set out inquiring about Wen Chao.

A lot had changed in eight hundred years. Cultivating sects were in the midst of a civil war, and Hua Cheng listened with something close to apathy. Ghost City was on the farthest reaches of the corporeal world, so he had never needed to worry about trouble making its way onto his doorstep.

But Xie Lian was sure to hear of this. War was not something unfamiliar to the former martial god, and it was certain that he would have thoughts on this.

Hua Cheng just had to wait for him to come back home, first. But he had time to kill, so he twisted his appearance, stepping out of Ghost City again to appear in a village. It seemed like it was occupied by the Wens, judging by the sun pennants that snapped in the wind.

The guards were easy enough to spot. They wore white robes with blood red embellishments on them, flaring out like the corona of a sun. Their hands were almost always on their swords, and they swaggered down the street arrogantly.

Not even attempting to hide it, then? Hua Cheng stepped to the side, his eyes flickering over their appearance. They looked young, but their faces had that familiar pinched look of cruelty in them. So this was the Wen Clan.

Slowly, Hua Cheng made his way around town, politely asking about the war. Turns out, there was a campaign currently ongoing to destroy the Wen Clan, dubbed the Sunshot

Campaign.

‘ Did a poet come up with this name? ’ Hua Cheng mused, stopping at the edge of the village. No one saw a young man disappear, folding into himself until nothing was left of him.

Xie Lian was already in Ghost City, in Qiandeng temple. Hua Cheng stepped through the doors, his disguise melting away to reveal a smile on his face.

“Gege, this one missed you so.”

Xie Lian turned around, his eyes crinkling with amusement. “San Lang, we saw each other at breakfast today.”

“But it’s been a whole day, gege.” Hua Cheng approached Xie Lian, wrapping his arms around his waist and resting his chin on Xie Lian’s shoulder. “And this one would like to ask you something.”

“San Lang, you can ask me anything you want, no matter where we are.”

“What do you think of the current war happening? The one between cultivation clans.”

Xie Lian didn’t respond for a while, turning back to the piles of work that had most likely come from Heaven.

“I don’t know. It seems like they’re fighting for something righteous, but both sides... Well, it’s too early to make any concrete conclusions right now. Why do you ask?”

“This one went to Yiling Burial Mounds a few days ago, to check on the ghosts there.” Hua Cheng murmured. “I saw someone there. He must have been against the Wen Clan, and he was abandoned there.”

Xie Lian frowned. “I never thought that people would be capable of leaving others to die in Yiling.”

“This one believes humans are capable of anything.” Hua Cheng muttered darkly.

“And? What did you do for that man?”

“I bet with him.”

The exasperated sigh from Xie Lian was something that Hua Cheng would never get tired of hearing.

“San Lang. What did you offer him?”

“Help,” Hua Cheng said simply. “Even if he does survive there, it won’t be a good life.”

“What’s gotten into you these days, hm? I’ve never seen you commit altruistic acts for anyone else before.”

“Gege is so mean,” Hua Cheng whined. “He just reminds me of someone else, that’s all.”

“What’s his name?”

“Wei Wuxian.”

Xie Lian hummed. “I would like to meet this new disciple of yours some day, San Lang.”

“Gege!”

Wei Wuxian was alive. Wretched, lying half buried in mud, bones and blood, but undeniably alive. He couldn’t move without pain slicing into his head, but the whispers of resentful energy wormed its way into his mind, filling his head with violent images.

But then the voices quietened. A man stood over him, his skin ghastly pale and his hair loose. Blood rain heralded the arrival of this creature, and Wei Wuxian choked soundlessly, blood flooding into his mouth, his nose, and tinting his vision red.

The creature smiled, his eye glowing bright red.

The blood was almost alive, worming into his chest and lungs, forcing each breath into a hacking rattle. He was drowning, and there was nothing he could do.

Finally, when darkness overcame him, he shot up, his breaths echoing in the damp cave that he’d chosen to sleep in. The metallic taste of blood was still on his tongue, and he groped around for his cane before stumbling out.

There was no water in the burial mounds, and the few puddles there were always cloudy with resentful energy and rotting flesh. Just looking at the water made his stomach churn, and he turned away. What could he find here?

His body hadn’t healed enough to allow him to go on long trips yet, so he was reduced to hobbling around the cave, looking for something to eat or drink.

Absently, he thought of that strange man in his dreams. He’d seen the man in red before, he was sure of it.

Wei Wuxian had been offered a bet by him, but all his instincts had screamed at him to refuse the bet, which he did. But now, Wei Ying felt the stirrings of regret. He still hadn’t gotten a strong grasp over the resentful energy here yet, and it never rained enough to drink, just enough to cause the bodies to rot.

“Aiya, I can’t even get something to drink here, let alone eat.” Wei Wuxian muttered to himself. “At this rate, I’ll die from thirst before the resentful energy gets me.”

“Oh, what a shame. I suppose you’ll have to turn to being a vicious ghost instead then?”

Wei Wuxian spun around, holding his cane up before nausea forced him to lean on it heavily.

The man was back. Pale as death, dressed all in red, with silver and black accents, an eyepatch covering one of his eyes and blood dripping off his umbrella. A sabre hung on his hip, a spinning red eye embedded in its hilt. Strangely, the blood never seemed to touch him or Wei Wuxian, but he wasn't going to question it.

“Who are you?”

The man bowed. “Where are my manners? My name is Crimson Rain Sought Flower, but my friends call me Hua Cheng.”

“Am I your friend, then?”

Hua Cheng's lips quirked up in a small smile. “Do you want to be?”

Wei Wuxian was at a loss for words. This man clearly did not look like a cultivator from any known clan— or even a rogue cultivator for that matter—but he still emitted an aura of danger. And the resentful energy... it was almost as if Hua Cheng was emanating the energy from his own body.

Hua Cheng tossed him a bag conjured from who knows where, and Wei Wuxian opened it gingerly, enticed by the smell of meat buns. His stomach growled with hunger, and he wasted no time in stuffing half the meat bun into his mouth, savouring the gamey flavour of the bun.

“What do you have to gain from all... this?” Wei Wuxian mumbled from around a mouthful of meat, narrowing his eyes suspiciously at Hua Cheng. “Money? Fame? A new body to experiment with?”

Hua Cheng looked like Wei Wuxian had marched up to him and slapped him across the face.

Of course. When he exposed their plans, they would all have the same expression of righteous anger and confusion. Wei Wuxian huffed. “I knew it-”

“You've got it all mixed up.” Hua Cheng interrupted. “I really do want to help you. It's been a while since I've interfered in the affairs of humans.”

“You speak like you aren't human.” Wei Wuxian muttered. To no one's surprise, Hua Cheng split into a smile.

“You're right, I don't. Why don't we speak about this more at your residence?”

“No.” Wei Ying hesitated, but still dipped into a short bow towards Hua Cheng. It would be unwise to aggravate the only ally he had.

“I'm sorry, but how do I know if you bear ill will or not? Until I can trust you, or at least protect myself, I'll have to decline. Thank you for the food though.”

“Of course.” Hua Cheng just smiled. “Would you like to take another bet?”

He held out the dice again, and they gleamed in the filtered sunlight. Wei Wuxian stepped forward, grabbing the two dice. He tossed them, watching as they clattered across the air as

though there was an invisible surface.

“Three.” Hua Cheng nodded, sweeping up the dice and tucking them into his sleeve. “See you then, Wei Wuxian. Try not to die in a freak accident.” He tossed something else out, and a rift was torn in the air. It seemed like a small hut of some sort, situated in a rural area.

And then Wei Wuxian was alone in a mass grave.

He walked back to his cave, folding the paper bag neatly and sealing it with the remnants of his energy so the food would remain fresh. Then, he hiked to the large lake that he had found earlier, setting down his cane and looking into the rusty depths. From the smell of it, it seemed to be blood.

There was nothing more he wanted to do than to leave this place, but it wasn’t like there was anything else he could do.

He dipped his hands into the blood and got to work.

The sigils were messy and the array crooked, but it would serve its purpose well enough. Taking a few deep breaths, he pressed his fingers to the dark brown lines and pulled, dragging the resentful energy swirling around him and diffusing it through his spiritual network.

It filled him in a strange way, cold and hot all at the same time. His hands shook, but he forced them steady and pushed more into the array. When it pulsed dark red, only then did he pull his fingers away from the small patch of stone and observe his handiwork.

For a first attempt, he had replicated a talisman very easily. But it was still missing most of its power, only flickering weakly instead of burning brightly.

He needed more. More power, more strength, more energy. But there was only so much he could do with the energy floating around. He had no sword, no spiritual weapon, nothing he could use as a possible conduit.

He’d had to make one, then.

Wei Wuxian stood up, but his vision turned grey and he had to kneel back down. His body hurt, and his limbs shook. Quickly, he reassessed his priorities. More food, rest, and then he would start a search for a conduit.

Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Whew! I pumped this out in one day, so enjoy! I posted this in literature class, and we're doing Frankenstein. It's really interesting, and I recommend you read it ;D [it's the 1831 version, if I'm not mistaken]

Chapter Notes

qianbei: it just means elder, and you use this to refer to someone else with a respectful tone if they're older than you. It literally translates to "the generation before"

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

“Wei Wuxian, are you trying to become a corpse?” Hua Cheng’s voice cut through the fog in his mind, and he swore he could detect a hint of amusement in his voice. “This is the second time I’ve met you while you were half buried in the mud.”

“Shut up,” Wei Wuxian grumbled, grabbing at the reeds growing alongside the riverbank and pulling himself out of the water with an obscene squelch. “I was trying something out.”

“That something being...?”

Wei Wuxian scowled, stomping out of the mud. “I was trying to look for a conduit.”

“In this place?”

“I can’t leave a single stone unturned, can I? This place is barren enough as it is, I can’t afford to lose even a single resource.” Wei Wuxian gestured at the river. “Even if I have to go wading around.”

“What a shame. Ghost City has hundreds of conduits and rare weapons. You could pick one.”

Wei Wuxian glared at Hua Cheng. “You don’t have to tell me that. You dress like a young lord already, so it stands to reason you’d collect rare weapons.”

“I’m assuming that’s a no?”

“Creating your own conduit is better. That way, I can adjust it to my liking.” Wei Wuxian pushed past Hua Cheng, heading back to his cave.

“So hardworking.”

“It’s not easy cultivating new techniques. We can’t all be naturally gifted with resentful energy.” Wei Wuxian retorted.

These few days with Hua Cheng were strange. They had settled into a routine, but their relationship was... unconventional. Hua Cheng would show up randomly, always impeccably dressed and with a few sharp words on his tongue. Wei Wuxian would retort back, flinging insults with him that were meant to be lighthearted. Yet there were times where Hua Cheng would instruct Wei Wuxian, and he would learn from Hua Cheng.

“You’ve really spruced this place up.”

Wei Wuxian glanced around, at the stack of hastily drawn seals and talismans scattered on the floor to the bedraggled stack of dried reeds and grasses that he used for a bed and the stash of items that he had collected on his wanderings through the burial mounds.

“Yes, it’s so homey,” Wei Wuxian said wryly, sitting down at a low stone slab. “Really drives home the ‘I cultivate in pools of blood’ vision.”

“There’s nothing wrong with blood, I make it rain blood wherever I go.” Hua Cheng shrugged, taking a seat and pulling one of the talismans towards him. “What are you making?”

“I’m experimenting with usual talismans. Right now, I’m just messing around with them.”

Hua Cheng lifted the talisman closer to his eye. “This doesn’t look like cinnabar.”

Wei Wuxian shrugged. “It’s blood. Mine, to be exact.”

“Interesting choice of medium.” Hua Cheng didn’t seem surprised, but then again, Wei Wuxian had already known that Hua Cheng wasn’t quite human. Talismans written in blood would hardly be the strangest thing he’d seen.

Wei Wuxian sighed, gathering the talismans up and squinting at them. “Unless I can get my hands on some pre-made talismans, this is the best I can do.”

“You can ask me for things, you know. It’s not a bad thing to ask for help, and it would significantly aid you in your cultivation.” Hua Cheng propped his chin on his hand.

“It’s not the same.” Wei Wuxian threw his hands up in frustration. “It’s like... aiya, I don’t really know how to explain it. If you draw it with your own blood, it adds a touch of personalisation.”

“It’s just tooting your own horn, isn’t it?”

“Tooting your own...” Wei Wuxian trailed off, his eyes widening. “Oh of course! Hua Cheng, you’re a genius!”

Wei Wuxian ran to the lake, dropping to his knees and digging at the reeds that choked the riverbanks. If he could create a musical instrument, he could channel the resentful energy through it. And what better instrument to use than a dizi?

It was one that he had some experience in, as a child. They had bamboo near Lotus Pier, and often, they would cut off stalks to whittle into rough flutes that would provide them some entertainment in the hot afternoons.

His arms laden with muddy reeds, he hurried back to the cave. Hua Cheng was gone, but there was a canteen lying on the stone slab. Two dice sat on the table, and Wei Ying tossed them, watching as they rolled around before settling.

Snake eyes. So he'd see Hua Cheng after two days.

Wei Wuxian spent these two days carving the reeds into flutes and testing them out. Some were too brittle, some too soft. Some didn't make the right sounds, and some... well, they just broke apart in his hands.

Wei Wuxian tossed the latest failure to the ground, curling up and looking sullenly at the pile of reeds he'd gathered. They were currently being burned, and he rolled into bed, pulling his outer robes over him as a blanket.

Hua Cheng stepped into the dim cave, glancing over at the lumpy figure of Wei Wuxian. So he was attempting to make a flute. These reeds were all useless for making musical instruments in the first place.

He picked up the dice, inspecting them. Two days. No. Hua Cheng could help with this. Just this once. He turned back, stepping back into Paradise Manor and heading to the armoury. He would have something for Wei Wuxian there.

Along the way, Xie Lian joined him, linking their arms together.

"San Lang, where are we going today?"

"This one is taking you to the armoury. Wei Wuxian has recently started to choose a weapon for himself, and his choice seems to be a dizi."

"Interesting choice," Xie Lian commented. "He sounds like a swordsman to me, from what you've described."

"Regardless, he chose a flute, so a flute he shall receive."

"San Lang is treating his disciple so well, spoiling him from his own armoury." Xie Lian teased, and Hua Cheng groaned.

"He's not my disciple."

"Why not? You advise him on his cultivation, feed him, treat him well—" Xie Lian had a poorly disguised smile on his face. "—this one thinks that maybe you have a soft spot for

him.”

Hua Cheng stepped into the armoury, a smile on his face from Xie Lian’s teasing. He had grown bolder since the many trials and tribulations, and often, Hua Cheng would find a witty quip falling from Xie Lian’s lips.

Still, he liked this side of Xie Lian. How could he not? Xie Lian was still irreplaceably, unerringly him, at the end of the day.

“What about this one?” In Xie Lian’s hands was a flute, carved from darkened jade and of fine craftsmanship. It was an elegant instrument, but Hua Cheng could not, for the life of him, figure out where he got that from.

Most likely a prize from the gambling den, won from some poor fool who bet his possessions on chance. It didn’t have any energy clinging to it at all, and a quick spell revealed that this was simply a pretty instrument, nothing more.

“Gege always has a good eye for beautiful things.” Hua Cheng smiled, taking the flute from Xie Lian and keeping it.

“Oh, are you complimenting yourself now, San Lang?”

“Gege, when did you gain such a sharp tongue?”

“This one has San Lang to thank for that.”

Wei Wuxian woke slowly. For a moment, he could pretend that he was back in Lotus Pier, and the smell of rain lent to that illusion.

Then it was broken when Wei Wuxian finally woke up, and he jumped up, rushing outside to stand in the thunderstorm. The rain drenched him in seconds, and he carried out his dirty clothes to scrub out the dried mud.

He opened his mouth, letting the rain trickle in and savouring the sweet taste of fresh water.

When he arrived back in, feeling significantly cleaner and happier, he noticed something. A flute was on the table, dark and glossy. A gift from Hua Cheng, no doubt. He had denied needing any assistance from Hua Cheng, but he didn’t relish having to carve himself a new dizi from scratch, so he simply picked up the flute and lifted it to his lips, taking a deep breath.

The first few notes were shaky, but the sound was clear and vibrant. The flute itself seemed solid and sturdy, and now, Wuxian was presented with another puzzle: how could he channel the energy through his instrument?

The question took up most of his days now. His relationship with the resentful energy was shaky at best, and disastrous at worst. Often, he would wake to see dark wisps clinging to the flute, and when he touched it, the instrument would be cold.

But he still persevered.

Which is how he found himself kneeling before four sets of remains two days later, head bowed as though he was in prayer. He knew what a sight he must make, covered in blood red and pitch black energy, his eyes flickering from grey to red and back again.

His flute was pressed to his lips, and Wuxian didn't think he could pull it away even if he wanted to. Clear music floated out, haunting and beautiful, and Wei Wuxian scrutinised the bodies closely.

Slowly, he lowered his flute and spoke.

“Wake up.”

The reaction was instantaneous.

The bodies jerked upwards, smoke pouring from their nose, their mouth, their eyes. They flooded Wei Wuxian, who suppressed a groan at the chill that flooded him. His spiritual veins were pulsing with power, and he lifted the flute to his lips and blew again.

The chill retreated, shrinking back until only his fingers were tingling with the cold.

His body was vibrating with power, every molecule of his being charged with feeling. He gasped quietly, almost falling into the mud again with the power.

“Wei Wuxian?”

Who... was that? When... Did someone else come? The spirits should have warned him. But he knew that voice.

“Hua Cheng?” He gasped, clawing at the mud. “I did it. I... ngh.”

Cold hands—colder than his own body—helped him up, pressing him close against a body brimming with resentful energy.

“Come along now. You've worked hard.”

Wei Wuxian's vision faded in and out. One moment, he was kneeling before the corpses, the next, he was lying in his own bed.

“Hua Cheng?” He rasped. He could hear Hua Cheng's quiet footsteps echoing in the cave, and it brought a strange sense of comfort to him.

“Hm?”

“Could you tell me something?”

“About?”

“What happens if I die?”

Hua Cheng gave him a strange look, but said nothing.

And Wei Wuxian was gone.

When Wei Wuxian woke, he saw a new set of robes waiting for him, but no one else.

Hua Cheng wasn't visiting anymore. That was fine by Wei Wuxian, but he missed having a companion to talk to.

So for the first time in a long time, he stepped foot outside the Burial Mounds. The town of Yiling was vibrant and colourful, and Wei Wuxian busied himself with catching up to date.

Two months. He had spent two months in that place, and he felt a strange sense of satisfaction and pride. He had developed an entirely new form of cultivation in two months.

He wondered if Lan Zhan would be proud of him, but quickly dismissed that thought. No, of course not. He probably hated demonic cultivation, even though this *technically* didn't count. He was just harnessing resentful energy to fill his spiritual veins.

Ah, but Lan Zhan wouldn't see the difference anyway.

"Wei Wuxian!" A familiar voice called out, and Wuxian turned. Hua Cheng was there, albeit in a different, younger form. His face was rounder, fuller, and he wasn't wearing an eyepatch.

Another man was beside him, dressed in the plain white robes of a rogue cultivator and a straw hat on his back. He had a gentle smile on his face, but his grasp was firm and calloused when Wuxian shook his hand.

"My name is Xie Lian. It's nice to finally meet my husband's disciple." Xie Lian smiled, and Hua Cheng made an embarrassed noise.

"Gege, Wei Wuxian isn't my disciple."

"He's not?"

"I'm not?"

Wei Wuxian and Xie Lian glanced at each other, coming to a silent agreement.

"Hua *qianbei*, forgive this one's impudence, but did you come to visit your not-disciple?"

Hua Cheng sighed, giving him a glare that would have been more threatening had he not been in disguise.

"Wei Wuxian, you really..."

Wei Wuxian just smiled innocently and turned to Xie Lian.

"What brings you both to Yiling?"

Xie Lian shrugged. “We didn’t have a particular reason to visit. It’s been a long time since I’ve visited where my city was, and Yiling was along the way, so we dropped by. I’m glad we caught you out of the burial mounds.”

“It’s my first time in two months, actually. I wanted to know how the world was doing.”

Xie Lian nodded knowingly. “Shall we talk elsewhere?”

They end up around a table in one of the local inns, talking quietly among themselves. Even among the citizens of Yiling, the talk of war was everywhere.

The Wen Clan were winning, and by a large margin. The Sunshot campaign was failing. They would most likely lose, since Wen Ruohan had been ruthless in the razing of many sect strongholds. Their strongest cultivators were falling, and the cruelty of the Wen soldiers knew no bounds.

Wei Wuxian looked at Hua Cheng and Xie Lian. At a glance, they looked to be about twenty, at most. But the way they spoke of the war, with a casualness that belied experience, that threw him off.

“Hua *qianbei* , are the two of you not human?” Wei Wuxian winced at how blunt his question was, but he really wanted to know. How could a human control the ghosts in the Burial Mounds? It had taken him weeks of negotiation and slow unravelling until he could finally take the resentful energy into his soul, but Hua Cheng emanated it.

Hua Cheng shrugged. “Do you think we’re human?”

Not really , Wei Wuxian wanted to say. But what if they asked him to defend his claims? What then? It was Xie Lian who stepped in again.

“San Lang, don’t tease your disciple. In any case, no. We aren’t humans, but I don’t think who we are really matters in this situation.” Xie Lian said, not unkindly. “What are you going to do? The war will not last forever. You can’t stay in the Burial Mounds forever.”

“I can try,” Wei Wuxian muttered under his breath, but deep down, he knew it was futile. He was itching to return, to see Jiang Cheng, his *shijie*, Lan Zhan, and everyone else. He wanted to fight in the war, and he wanted to make the Wens pay.

“I think... I’ll return.” He said cautiously. “Find a way to prove myself.”

Xie Lian nodded, and there was a glint in his eyes. “Be careful. People aren’t who you think they are.”

It wasn’t until later, when he was making the final preparations, then did Wei Wuxian parse out what the look in Xie Lian’s eyes was.

It was the look of someone who knew what was going to happen.

Wei Wuxian shook that thought off. No, he had a goal now. He just needed a little more time. One more month, he promised himself. Then he would leave.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for the support this fic has gotten! I didn't know it was going to be this popular, heh. If there are some plotheoles, please do tell me. This is unbetaed, and I might be going through this again to edit it (not major changes, ofc).

Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

A word of warning. I will be going into detail with how the corpses tore apart Wei Wuxian. If that's not your cup of tea, no problem! I'll be providing a summary in the end notes, so you need not suffer through graphic descriptions of gore!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Being back in action again was... strange.

Wei Wuxian had wiped out three Supervisory Offices and the Wens that came with it, and he had expected people would be pleased. Glad, even, to have him on their side.

So much had changed since then. Jiang Cheng was now the sect leader of Yunmeng Jiang.

But it was hard to ignore the openly wary stares he got from everyone else. And... Jiang Cheng had changed. His face was pinched and drawn, and he was more prone to flare ups now.

He harboured a disturbing passion towards hating the Wens, and it was like he was drugged by fury when he saw them on the battlefield. None were spared by Zidian.

Lan Zhan avoided him, and even if he didn't, he spent so much time urging Wei Wuxian to come back to Cloud Recesses with him.

No. He couldn't. If he did, he would be locked up, stuffed into a lightless cell or executed. The latter seemed more likely. They hated his cultivation, but they needed it. After the war, he would no longer be needed.

He tried not to think about that.

"Wei Ying." Lan Zhan's low voice interrupted his thoughts, and he roused himself, looking down at the map on the table. The sect leaders were all gathered around it, and he plastered on a careless smile.

"Sorry, I wasn't listening. What did you say?"

Someone muttered something about him being cocky, but Wei Wuxian ignored it, instead looking straight at the table. He wasn't good with wartime politics, and this sort of thing bored him to tears.

They still insisted on his attendance for some reason known to everyone else but him, though he suspected it could be due to their need to keep an eye on him.

“We were asking if you knew anyway we could infiltrate the Nightless City.” Nie Mingjue pointed out a few flags with the sun of the Qishan Wen painted on. He pushed them closer, deeper into their territory.

Wei Wuxian shrugged. “Storm them.”

“I *beg* your pardon?” Jin Guangshan spluttered, and Wei Wuxian spared him a cursory glance. Usually, he never joined them here, opting to provide empty words and conveniently timed messages that he was needed back at the city.

“I said, storm the Nightless City. Just focus on getting to Wen Ruohan. I’ll take care of the soldiers.”

“You-!”

“See you.”

Wei Wuxian left, tugging the flute out of his pocket and heading into the woods. It didn’t matter that he was most likely going to be excluded from future war meetings.

That suited him.

He could deal with the soldiers, that was true. But it would require the Stygian Tiger Amulet. He disliked using it, but if he had to...

He lifted the flute to his lips and played a single sharp note, then brought his hands together and snickered.

“For the Crimson Rain Sought Flower; this disciple offers you the one note as a humble offering.”

There was a moment of silence, then Hua Cheng’s voice sounded out in the clearing as he stepped out from the ether. He had a look of playful annoyance on his face as he lectured Wei Ying.

“Disciples should be obedient and respectful. And what kind of offering is a single note horrid enough to wake the dead?”

Wei Wuxian bowed. “Hua *qianbei* , with all due respect, you are dead.”

“And mouthy, too. I should punish this disciple of mine.” Hua Cheng frowned, but amusement flickered in his eye. “What’s wrong?”

“Can’t this disciple pay respects to his teacher?” Wei Wuxian sighed. He could never hide much from Hua Cheng. “Where’s Xie *da-ge* ?”

“He’s... busy. Gege is an important figure, so they need his help settling a dispute over land.” Hua Cheng wrinkled his nose. “If they don’t let him go... I swear to *Diyu* -”

“Hua *qianbei* . Calm down, I think Xie *da-ge* can take care of himself.”

“I know he can, it’s just... He can be a little forgiving at times. Even towards people who don’t deserve it.”

Wei Wuxian’s lips parted.

“Wei Wuxian! Who are you talking to?”

In the space of a breath, Hua Cheng had disappeared, leaving Wei Wuxian alone to deal with Jiang Cheng.

“I was talking to the spirits.” Wei Wuxian called out, pulling out his flute again.

Jiang Cheng pushed through the undergrowth, glaring at Wuxian with clear suspicion on his face. “The meeting has ended. We storm the Nightless City in a week’s time.”

“That’s good. That’s... really good.” Wei Wuxian fingered his flute absently, pressing onto the holes.

The war would be over soon. The Sunshot Campaign would no longer exist, and he could eke out a living.

It was foolish to think that he would be let off , Wei Wuxian thought bitterly.

In the absence of a common enemy, the people would look for one. They thought themselves the saviours of the light, the paladins of good. And so, they would band around a common cause and root out the opposition.

He was a convenient scapegoat. A demonic cultivator of high calibre, in control of the Stygian Tiger Amulet, and evidently, a supporter of the Wens to boot. The Jins could practically rejoice at such an easy villain.

He was accused of heinous crimes. He became the face of evil, and his reputation besmirched. All of this, he could bear it. He could live with the dredges of society. It was fine.

It had to be fine.

Then the nightmares started.

Screaming, howling beasts, tearing at his mind. He was alone in the Burial Mounds again, just an injured teenager stumbling through the wastelands, oppressing energy snapping at his heels. Blood fell from the skies and drenched him, pouring over him in waves.

Then they started to appear. Humanoid figures, faces sculpted from bone and blood. Their voices were high and mocking, and they laughed at Wei Wuxian. Yanli pleaded with him. Madame Yu lifted her head high and brought Zidian down on his body. He felt the burning sizzle on his back.

All of them pointed their bloodied, mutilated fingers at him and laughed.

You. Did. This.

After that, Wei Wuxian never slept much anymore. He kept himself up, feverishly working on new inventions. Spirit Luring flags, compasses that detected evil, new talismans. Perhaps he was trying to work towards some kind of atonement.

But Wei Wuxian would never know.

In a flash, he had been ambushed. Jin Zixuan was dead, and Wen Ning was no longer under his control.

Things were moving too fast, so much was slipping out of his grasp like sand. The Wens, Wen Ning and Wen Qing. Jiang Cheng, his affiliation to Yunmeng Jiang.

“I’m sorry. And thank you.”

His last image of Wen Qing and Wen Ning was marred by tears.

Everything else was a blur afterwards. Shijie’s death, Nightless City, the massacre, Lan Zhan —oh heavens above, *Lan Zhan* —pleading with him to stop.

Ironically, he remembered his death clearly. When he’d broken the amulet, he felt it. The resentful energy, without a catalyst, used his body as one. He had fallen to his knees, he remembered. The stone dug at his knees and hands, and he fought the urge to throw up. The broken shards of the amulet glittered mockingly at him, and with a start, he realised that the corpses had all turned to him.

A lifetime ago, Hua Cheng had gifted him one of his dice.

“If you ever need my help. If you need to escape somewhere safe, roll the dice. No matter the distance, no matter the place. I will come for you.” Hua Cheng said, pressing the die into Wuxian’s palm.

Back then, he had assured Hua Cheng that he would never need to use it. But he had always kept it safe and close by.

Now, he lay still, letting the corpses get closer to him. Their nails tore at his skin, and when the first corpse ripped at his hands, he swore that he wouldn’t scream. Then they bit into him, and all his inhibitions were removed.

But he didn’t push them away. What was the point? Death was a far sweeter release than imprisonment. And at least this way, there would be nothing for the sects to work with.

When his flesh was being torn from his body, his throat hoarse from screaming, he pulled the dice out, tossing it as far as possible.

With his remaining vocal cords, he choked out two words. "Help... me."

Then a corpse sank its teeth into his exposed heart, and Wei Wuxian, the Yiling Patriarch, was no more.

When Hua Cheng got the message from the die, he almost dismissed it as a prank, if not for the desperation and pain bleeding through Wei Wuxian's voice.

"Help... me."

In a flash, he was standing there. For a split second, Hua Cheng wondered if he had somehow been pulled into the depths of hell. The scene in front of him was macabre. Blood was splashed across a twisted tangle of bodies, and empty, milky eyes stared at him. Gaping mouths filled with flesh and blood hung open, and it took a while to recognise Wei Wuxian.

Not that there was much of him left.

Hua Cheng reached towards the body, lifting Wei Wuxian up and turning him over. His visage was marred beyond belief, long, ugly tears crossing his skin. With a sick feeling, Hua Cheng realised how there wasn't a lot of dripping blood, and he began to piece together what had happened.

The corpses... the flesh. Suddenly, Hua Cheng felt sick.

[Somewhere, in the back of his mind, he thought of a god impaled on an altar, blood trickling from his mouth and his eyes empty and hollow. He thought of a thousand swords, desperate faces and screams that petered out into whimpers.]

"Wei Wuxian," he murmured, pulling out his dice and tossing them. "What have they done to you?"

Hua Cheng stepped through the portal, painfully aware of the way blood seeped into his clothes. He headed straight for the guest chambers with one express thought in his head: Don't let Xie Lian see this.

But fate was wretched, and Hua Cheng ran into Xie Lian on the way. The moment the god's eyes fell on Wei Wuxian, his smile faded.

"Is he..."

"Gege," Hua Cheng choked out. "He-"

Xie Lian nodded like he understood. "Let's get him somewhere clean first. We can talk later."

It was easy enough to arrange Wuxian's corpse on the bed, and Hua Cheng tried to draw out Wei Wuxian's soul, to little avail. It was trapped somewhere, deep down in an abyss of his

own creation.

When Xie Lian touched Hua Cheng's hand, he allowed himself to break.

"He was eaten alive." Hua Cheng withheld a shudder. Even Qi Rong had the sense to cook his humans first. "There didn't seem to be any kind of struggle."

Xie Lian sucked in a sharp breath. "So he—"

"I think... he broke the amulet. And when he did, the resentful energy backfired on him." Hua Cheng frowned. "That shouldn't be possible. Wei Wuxian had it under control, what forced him to break it?"

"We can ask him when he wakes up, can't we? It would be better than speculating over his body." Xie Lian grasped Hua Cheng's arm and led him away, but not before Hua Cheng sent a few of his butterflies to watch over Wei Wuxian.

"The war is over," Xie Lian observed. "Do you think there will be people coming into Ghost City? They would know what happened to Wei Wuxian."

Hua Cheng snorted. "I wouldn't be surprised if they were spreading lies about Wei Wuxian as we speak. Their loyalties are fickle as the wind."

Xie Lian nodded sagely. "That is true. Only my husband can be counted on to remain loyal."

Hua Cheng smiled. "This husband will forever remain devoted to you, gege."

Wuxian- no, Wei Ying's waking was slow and torturous. His body had apparently missed the memo that he was supposed to be dead. His body still ached all over, but he struggled to sit up. Almost alarmingly quick, someone stepped into the room, and Wei Ying couldn't help it. He stared.

It was a humanoid figure, dressed in resplendent silk robes. But they didn't have a face. They wore a grotesque mask, the visage of a snarling demon splashed with green and red on it. Their hair was knotted neatly on top of their head.

"You're awake." The person's voice was nasally, almost bored, and they picked up a physician's bag. "Please wait here, I'll go and fetch Hua *Chengzhu*."

And then he was gone, leaving Wei Ying alone. He lifted his hands. Wiggled his fingers. Checked his wrists. No bite marks. No strips of flesh torn away. No exposed bone.

There was an absence of resentful energy in the air—rather, it was as if the very air he breathed was permeated with a different kind of resentful energy. So he was well. He had died. Of this, Wei Ying was sure.

But the doors opened, and his thoughts came to a screeching halt.

Hua Cheng and Xie Lian were there, and they were looking at him with wide, fearful eyes.

“Hi.” Wei Ying smiled bitterly. “It’s nice to see you two again.”

He could barely say another two words when he was engulfed in warmth. Instinctively, his hand shot to his waist, but Chengqing wasn’t there. He forced himself to remain calm, to push away the honed instincts that were an unfortunate byproduct of the war.

Hua Cheng and Xie Lian were hugging him.

He blinked.

This was wrong, he thought as his arms snaked around them slowly.

But Wei Ying had never felt more at home.

Chapter End Notes

da-ge: big brother, but it can also be used as an honorific for someone older than you, but they do not need to have familial ties for this.

chengzhu: literally translates to city lord, it's Hua Cheng's title as the ruler of Ghost City.

diyu: the underworld, it just means hell

-

Summary of what happened: Wei Wuxian was torn apart by his own fierce corpses after he destroyed the stygian tiger amulet, but he tossed a die that allowed Hua Cheng to collect his body and soul and spirit him to Ghost City.

Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

found family of ghosts, anyone?

To make it clear, this all happened during the 13 years that Wei Ying was dead for. I've always wondered how his spirit managed to stay out of the cultivating world, and I like to think Hua Cheng shielded him. For this story, it's post canon tgc, but mdzs is still ongoing. I hope this makes it clear, since I'll have to mash both worlds together and I am eagerly looking forward to making up stupid talismans for Wei Ying to abuse- I mean, put to use ;D

Okay, enough talk, enjoy the story!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The Ghost City was a strange place, Wei Ying decided. It was under the jurisdiction of Hua Cheng, but he alternated between bouts of time when he barely touched the state of affairs to days when he would hunch over his desk, tearing through the paperwork. His days were spent with Xie Lian, and he often left the City to its own devices.

Wei Ying wasn't allowed to leave Ghost City, Xie Lian warned. He'd heard rumours of them trying to summon the Yiling Patriarch's soul from beyond, and he would be safe here, since Hua Cheng could cloak him from their rituals.

That was fine. Ghost City was big, and it was constantly changing. Wei Ying was certain he could explore every nook and cranny of this place for ten years and he would still be surprised. Soon, the ghosts and demons started to recognise him.

They called him Young Master Wei, and they were polite to him. When he asked a question, they answered, and left him with more questions for Hua Cheng. But Hua Cheng wasn't always home.

He had explained that he and Xie Lian would often be spirited away to deal with all kinds of important problems. Xie Lian had explained that he was the one being spirited away, and Hua Cheng insisted on tagging along.

So his days in Ghost City were spent in solitude. He found an abandoned workshop filled with half finished trinkets and machines and took to it like a duck took to water. Most of the inventions were new, and Wei Ying thought of his lab in the Burial Mounds mournfully. So many of his new inventions would be taken, no doubt.

His nights were spent exploring the new limitations of being a spirit. Hua Cheng had said that he was more corporeal than most ghosts, but he couldn't tell if it was due to the resentful energy or some other factor. He didn't ask about his body, and Hua Cheng and Xie Lian didn't tell him what happened to it.

He could still play, though the flute that he obtained was nowhere near the level of Chenqing. And he graciously refrained from channelling resentful energy into the songs, lest a repeat of *that* night happened again.

Still, it was peaceful. And a little boring, but Wei Ying thought he'd rather take boredom over war anyway.

His routine was simple. He would wake up, dress himself, head out to the streets and attempt to gather information on the aftermath of the war. He'd stop for a quick lunch, then head back to Paradise Manor or Qiandeng temple.

Xie Lian had mentioned once that he was able to hear all of the offerings and prayers sent to him, though he usually learnt to tune it out. But Wei Ying still lit a stick of incense for him, and pressed both of his hands together. There, he would whisper things that he had seen in the city. Stories the ghosts told him, food that he'd eaten, and he'd always round it off with well wishes for the both of them.

Today, when he returned to his chambers, he found a silver butterfly, circling the room aimlessly. But when he stepped into the room, the creature shot towards him, flying circles around him before landing on his hand.

"Hello little guy," Wei Ying breathed, raising another hand to brush against the crystalline wings. The butterfly took off, shooting towards the door.

He followed the butterfly down the halls, into a side room located directly behind the main hall.

Hua Cheng and Xie Lian were already there, conversing quietly. They stopped when Wei Ying stepped in, and he felt a frisson of unease.

"Wei Ying, we've brought you here to clear up some misconceptions on our part." Xie Lian began. "We have been waiting a while for this conversation."

Hua Cheng nodded. "I'm not saying you have to answer now. That's up to you. But I think sharing would be good for you. Of course, if you'd rather share-"

"Just ask me the questions." Wei Ying interrupted brusquely, striding over and sitting down. He watched the silver butterfly land on Hua Cheng's arm brace and melt back into the ornament.

"Are you sure?"

"I owe you an explanation. You took me in and protected me, it's the least I could do."

Xie Lian shook his head. "We helped because we wanted to. You don't owe us anything. First question: do you remember how you died?"

Wei Ying chuckled humourlessly. "Going with the big questions first, huh? I was torn to shreds by fierce corpses."

Hua Cheng and Xie Lian exchanged looks.

"Do you remember... what happened?"

Wei Ying stiffened. He remembered their faces. None of the cultivators at Nightless City were capable of reason that night. "I... don't want to remember."

"That's okay." Hua Cheng relaxed, and the tension in the air was dispelled. "We're sorry for asking all these questions, but we just needed to know how bad the situation was."

"How bad?"

Another one of those inscrutable looks was exchanged again. Wei Ying really wanted to know how they were communicating like that.

"Ghost City has seen... several new faces recently." Hua Cheng began. "Normally, I don't care much for new people; they can come and go as they please, but this time, they came asking about you. Specifically, your death."

"How did they dress?"

"According to eyewitness reports, there were two separate encounters. One of them was dressed in white, with a ribbon tied around his forehead, and the other was dressed in purple."

Gusu and Yunmeng. Wei Ying groaned internally. This was... not a good combination. If they were working together, then Wei Ying would have to be confined to the walls of Paradise Manor.

"Have they gone?" Wei Ying asked.

Hua Cheng tilted his head, his eye distant as though he was looking at something else. "No. The purple one has gone into the gambling den. The white one stayed outside."

"Why would they ask after Wei Ying?" Xie Lian wondered. "I didn't think the world would want to look for him other than for less than noble purposes."

"We should see for ourselves. Gege, Wei Ying." Hua Cheng tossed his dice, and in the blink of an eye, they were standing behind the curtain in Gambler's Den.

Wei Ying spotted Jiang Cheng immediately. He was scowling at the table, but his eyes were bright and alert, darting about the place. He had Chenqing with him, and Wei Ying longed to reach out for his spiritual tool.

Hua Cheng swept over to the large, ornate chair, sitting down and whispering to an attendant outside the curtain, who nodded and turned to the crowds.

"Hua Chengzhu has noticed the presence of two esteemed gentlemen in this humble establishment, and he'd like to meet them. If the two honourable gentlemen would...?"

"Hua Chengzhu, with all due respect, I'm only here for one ghost in particular. We're looking for Wei Wuxian's soul."

Wei Ying inhaled sharply, and Xie Lian laid a gentle hand on his forearm.

When Hua Cheng spoke, there wasn't an ounce of geniality in his voice.

"This is a gambling den, not an information broker's den. If you want something from me, you'll have to play me for it."

Whispers erupted in the crowds.

"Play the Lord?"

"He's insane!"

"I'd rather die."

Then Lan Zhan swept in, closely followed by an attendant. He surveyed the place with an impassive look, then turned to Jiang Cheng.

"Sect leader Jiang."

"Hanguang-jun. How's your betting luck?"

"Gusu Lan forbids gambling." Lan Zhan responded primly.

Wei Ying had to hold back a snicker. That Lan Zhan never changed, did he?

Jiang Cheng let out a sharp bark of laughter. "Of course, how could I forget? Then I'll play with you, Hua Chengzhu."

"Wonderful. What will you bet?"

Jiang Cheng hesitated, and Wei Ying had a premonition of how it was going to go. Slowly, he drew out Chengqing and laid it on the table.

"I'll wager Chengqing, the spiritual weapon of the Yiling Patriarch, for any information about Wei Wuxian." Jiang Cheng announced.

An attendant swept over, and the flute disappeared into the sleeves of their robes. "The bets have been set. Will you bet odd, or bet even?"

There was a moment of hesitation. Wei Ying could sense all eyes were on this monumental bet, and he watched Jiang Cheng straighten.

“Even.”

“Very well.”

Jiang Cheng seized the cup, shaking it vigorously for a moment before slamming it down, opening it.

Two threes. He scored a six.

“I won, Hua Chengzhu.”

“So you did. And you asked for information regarding Wei Wuxian. I will deliver, but first, tell me: What do you intend to do with his spirit?”

“Is that any business of the Crimson Rain Sought Flower?” Jiang Cheng snapped, but Lan Zhan held out a hand. He stepped forward and bowed.

“Hua Chengzhu, we mean no disrespect coming here. The cultivation world has tried in vain to summon his spirit back, and they have searched every inch of land for him. This is the only location that we have not covered, and we were hoping for information on Wei Ying.”

Wei Ying started. This was the first time that he’d heard Lan Zhan speak more than two sentences in one go, and the shock was... not unpleasant, but strange. Hua Cheng glanced towards Wei Ying, and he nodded his head slightly.

Hua Cheng relented. “I have heard of Wei Wuxian. I know where he is.”

Jiang Cheng waited for a few more moments, but when he realised that was all Hua Cheng had to say on the matter, he exploded.

“Hua Chengzhu, I asked for-”

“-any information on Wei Wuxian, yes. You did not specify, so neither did I.” Hua Cheng had a razor sharp grin on his face, and Wei Ying was certain that Jiang Cheng could hear it too.

Beside him, Xie Lian sighed.

“San Lang...” He chided, but there was fond amusement in his words.

“You-”

“If you want to get more information, you can bet again.” Hua Cheng leaned back, looking like the cat that got the cream.

“Can I use Chenqing again?”

“You can, but the stakes are higher now. I expect something else from you.”

Jiang Cheng's face turned a frankly concerning number of colours before settling on red, and he slammed down a bag of coins.

The whole den exploded in raucous laughter.

“Silly cultivator! Betting with money, oh hold me-”

“Hah! He thinks Hua Chengzhu’s information can be bought with *money* !”

The attendant spoke, their voice cutting through the din. “Honoured guest, we don’t deal with money here. The bets here are more exotic. You could place bets with someone’s life, emotions, spiritual weapons, organs.”

“What the hell? You guys are sick.” Jiang Cheng spat, his face twisted in anger. Wei Ying noticed that lightning was sparking along Jiang Cheng’s fist.

“Well? Do you want information?” Hua Cheng drawled. “Time isn’t infinite, Sect Leader Jiang.”

Coming from Hua Cheng’s mouth, the title dripped with polite mockery. Wei Ying worried about Jiang Cheng’s blood pressure, but he kept quiet and watched the altercation play out.

“Fine. I’ll bet... five years of my life.” Jiang Cheng gritted out. Wei Ying glanced at Lan Zhan, and he could see the faint furrow on his brows that signified his disapproval. But they were grasping at straws now. This had been their last resort, and they didn’t know if they were going to have a next time.

“Will you bet on odd, or even?” The attendant’s voice carried out, and the silence spread outwards like a disease.

“Even.”

The dice rolled, and when it was uncovered, Wei Ying almost laughed in dizzy relief.

Three and four. Seven.

Jiang Cheng’s face darkened, and he made for his weapon, but Lan Zhan’s hand barred him. Jiang Cheng stepped forward again and bowed—though he looked incredibly unhappy about this turn of events.

"I lost. I will forfeit Chengqing and five years of my life, as promised."

But Hua Cheng wasn’t done.

“Hold it.”

Jiang Cheng and Lan Zhan stopped dead.

“I’m feeling rather magnanimous today. One more bet. But we’ll change up the rules a little.” Hua Cheng had a mischievous little smile now, and Wei Ying felt his heart rate quickening at that smile.

That smile meant trouble.

“Husband, what do you think? What should we put them through?”

Xie Lian smiled, and Wei Ying got the feeling that this wasn't the first time they had done this.

“Why not a battle?”

“An excellent idea. Gege, do you have any worthy contestants?”

Xie Lian ducked his head demurely, but he couldn't quite hide the smile on his face. “This one would like to nominate himself for this fight.”

Hua Cheng turned to Jiang Cheng, but Lan Zhan was quicker.

“We accept.”

“What- Hanguang-jun, are you out of your mind? The two of us against one?” Jiang Cheng hissed furiously. “We don't have good synergy at all!”

“Any chance is a chance.”

“Good!” Hua Cheng clapped his hands, and the room twisted, the dimension shifting and dissolving. When Wei Ying opened his eyes, he was looking at a large arena, and all the ghosts had been relocated to stone seats around the ring. Wei Ying was in the emperor's box, dark red silks fluttering gently and shielding him from curious gazes.

Xie Lian had an odd little smile on his face. “Hua Cheng doesn't usually do this, but I suppose he wanted to put on a show for you. Don't worry. I'll get it back.”

Before Wei Ying could ask what it was that Xie Lian would get back, Hua Cheng pulled Xie Lian away and Wei Ying stepped away to give them a moment. His heart felt hollow. Why did Hua Cheng want to show off? He didn't seem like the kind of guy who would do that.

Wei Ying worried at his lip, pacing the small area in the emperor's box. He knew Xie Lian could hold his own, but against two cultivators? Perhaps it would be a stretch.

But Xie Lian was a god, wasn't he? Could he... no, his powers had been minimal. Wei Ying had not sensed anything from him. It had taken him weeks to figure out that Xie Lian wasn't all that Wei Ying thought he was.

And yet... when Xie Lian landed in front of Lan Zhan and Jiang Cheng, he seemed like a different person, the sword held perfectly steady and his expression steely.

“Win against my husband, and you may go free with the location of Wei Wuxian. Lose, and you leave Chengqing with me.”

Jiang Cheng attacked. Zidian slashed forward, but Xie Lian merely sidestepped the blow, a gentle smile still on his face. He danced around Jiang Cheng's attacks, looking almost like he was bored.

Wei Ying turned to Hua Cheng, who sighed wistfully.

“Gege ascended as a martial god. These few centuries, he’s been fighting with barely any spiritual energy, so he knows his way around a fight very well.”

Wei Ying resolved to try and have a few fights against Xie Lian.

Xie Lian darted around, slamming the hilt of his sword on the back of Jiang Cheng’s head so hard he fell instantly, dead to the world. Lan Zhan pulled out his guqin, slamming out a powerful note. Xie Lian twisted, somehow avoiding the shockwave and leaping towards Lan Zhan.

Bichen shot out from behind Xie Lian, blocking the blade. Lan Zhan grabbed his sword and immediately engaged in a fierce exchange of blows. It was the battle of the millennium, their billowing robes and serene expressions at odds with the almost vicious snaps of their swords in the wind.

But eventually, Lan Zhan got tired, and he made a mistake. Xie Lian swept out his feet from under him and pointed his blade at his throat, and Wei Ying found himself clapping and cheering with the crowd.

It was an impressive show of martial prowess, and he watched as Lan Zhan stood up and bowed to Xie Lian, then picked out Chenqing from Jiang Cheng's robes and handed it to Xie Lian.

A few attendants rushed out to escort them, and Hua Cheng clapped again, the scene dissolving to the familiar sight of the Gambler's Den again.

Xie Lian stepped behind the curtain, and Wei Ying could barely reach out to grasp Chenqing, the cold jade humming in quiet delight.

“Chenqing,” Wei Ying breathed, picking up the instrument and running his fingers along it. It looked well cared for, which was surprising. Did they hang it up as a spoil of war?

“Someone once told me that a cultivator without his sword is sacrilege, right?” Hua Cheng’s eye twinkled. “I couldn’t find Suibian, but it was easy enough to arrange for Jiang Cheng to come here with Chenqing.”

“Ah, San Lang, you could have fought and defeated both of them with a flick of your finger.” Xie Lian shook his head. “Why did you have to let me go into the field?”

“Gege, you volunteered yourself, and this one will respect your decisions.”

“So I did!” Xie Lian looked down at his flute, a small smile making its way onto his face. “Happy birthday, Wei Ying.”

“Birthday?” He echoed.

“Birthday is incorrect. The day we found you is more accurate.” Hua Cheng matched Xie Lian's smile.

One year ago, Wei Ying had died a wretched death.

Today, he couldn't be happier.

Chapter End Notes

edit: I changed up the title! The title is from AJR's song "Good Part", and I feel like the theme of that song is very symbolic of wwx's sunshot campaign arc. I don't know about other writers, but I like my titles to somewhat match the overarching theme of the story

Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

This one is a rather short chapter (clocking in at about 1.8k words) since I have a lot of stuff planned for next chapter, but you're welcome to guess what I'm planning~~ ;D

Warning: there is a little bit of being eaten alive, but it stops at "A faint silver light filtered through his eyelids", so if you'd like, you're welcome to skip that!

Also, I changed the title! I thought the new title fits more, don't you agree?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Wei Ying was dying again. He was struggling against the iron grips of the corpses, and he felt their teeth brush almost tenderly against his pulse. They weren't tearing into anything vital yet.

No, they took him apart slowly. The pain was so sharp it was almost sweet, and he couldn't move. He was stuck, and his screams were lodged in his throat. His eyes were closed, and it magnified the sensation a hundred times.

A faint silver light filtered through his eyelids, and he heard the hoarse screams of the corpses. Warm blood splashed across his face, but it was not his.

Ah. It was one of the good dreams then.

Warmth suffused his body, and Wei Ying relaxed into his invisible bonds. He felt his skin and flesh knitting together, slowly healing until he was whole again, lying in a deathbed of gristle and gore.

Then gentle hands picked him up. They carried him, the silver butterflies tinkling quietly with bell chimes. He was laid on a warm surface, and his bloodied robes were removed. Warm, damp cloth wiped away the filth and tears on his skin tenderly, and he was dressed in light robes that were warm and cool on his skin at the same time.

The same hands lifted him and placed him in a warm bed, pulling a blanket over him.

He sighed quietly. This wasn't such a bad end to his dream.

“Good night, Wei Ying.”

He woke up in his bed. That was... uncommon. Usually, he fell asleep in his workshop, or he kept awake by wandering the streets and talking to the ghosts. But it wasn't an unwelcome change.

Wei Ying stepped out of bed, reaching for his own robes.

His fingers met empty air.

Wei Ying frowned and turned, then immediately whipped his head to the side.

After his death, he had insisted on refusing to look in the mirror. Perhaps it was an unfounded fear, but he was terrified of looking in the mirror and seeing a half eaten body staring back at him.

But he had caught a glimpse just now. He'd seen skin, wide, startled eyes and a mouth half opened in an unformed scream. It wasn't the visage of a person devoured by fierce corpses. It was *him* . Undeniably him.

Wei Ying almost wept in relief. He could face Lan Zhan. He had been so afraid of meeting him, but now, it was as if a weight had been lifted off his chest. He laughed, stepping back in front of the vanity mirror that had been placed in his room.

Apart from a sickly pallor to his skin, he looked perfectly fine. His robes were nowhere to be found, but a simple raid to the wardrobe settled that, and soon he was dressed and ready to leave.

He found Hua Cheng waiting for him, rubbing the red bead braided into his hair, seemingly deep in thought.

"Hua *qianbei* . Is today so special for you to be staying indoors on such a fine day?"

"Oh yes, what a terrible loss. I'll never be able to tan again." Hua Cheng deadpanned.

They stared at each other with something akin to amusement, and Wei Ying snickered. They both knew that the weather of Ghost City was almost always a perpetual muggy night, and Wei Ying wasn't sure if there was even a daytime there.

"Gege has gone up to heaven for a bit, so I thought we could go somewhere."

"Where?" Wei Ying's hand pressed to his flute, and he had to fight the urge to pull it out.

"The place where it all started. Come on." Hua Cheng retrieved his dice and stood up, tossing them towards Wei Ying. "Burial Mounds."

A moment of disorientation, and Wei Ying was standing in front of a dilapidated village. It took him a while to recognise it as the settlement he'd built with the Wens, and almost immediately, a burning lump formed in his throat.

Hua Cheng pressed a cool hand onto Wei Ying's shoulder, leading him along under the umbrella. They toured the village in silence, their footsteps kicking up dust and dirt. Wei

Ying lamented the cracked plots of land they had used to farm radishes, and if he closed his eyes and focused, he could almost hear A-yuan's joyful cries as he buried the child in dirt.

A sob wracked him and he slowly knelt, looking out at the empty landscape. The ghosts were always there, whispering at the edge of his mind, but this time, they were silent. He was grateful for their silence.

"I brought you here, because I thought you might want to... clean their graves." Hua Cheng began slowly. "As I remember, I believe humans have a custom of sweeping their ancestors' graves. I thought it might bring them some comfort."

"Can you... can you sense them?"

Hua Cheng shook his head slowly. "I can tell something bad happened here. But the spirits aren't here. Is there somewhere you want to do this?"

Wei Ying swallowed. "The Demon Subduing Palace. There's a table there we can use to set out offerings."

They must have made a strange pair in town: two men dressed in rich robes, buying fruits, flowers, joss paper and wine. But no one asked any questions. It was Qingming after all, and it wasn't as though what they were doing was against the law.

Back at the cave, Wei Ying busied himself with sweeping away all of the debris and dust that had gathered in his absence. As he thought, the wards had all been shattered, but he mended them, setting new talismans in place so that this place wouldn't be disturbed. Hua Cheng set down his umbrella and set about arranging the offerings on the table.

His inventions were all gone as well, but there were a few experimental talismans that the ransackers had missed, and Wei Ying tucked those into his sleeves. At least he'd recovered some of his original research. He found a few cracked plates and stuck the candles on, lighting them with a wave of his hand.

Then, he knelt before the table, his lips moving; in a silent prayer or an apology, he wasn't sure. But he had a lot to say. To Granny Wen, to Fourth Uncle, to A-Yuan, to Wen Ning and Wen Qing.

"I'm sorry. And thank you." He knelt three times, then looked around.

Hua Cheng was standing a little farther away, his eye closed and a small smile on his lips. Likely talking to Xie Lian then, since Wei Ying had only ever seen that smile reserved for his husband.

"Hua *qianbei* ? We're done here." Wei Ying stood up, bowing to the table again before stepping out, sealing the cave behind him. Usually, he'd have to come back a few days later to clear away the rotting food, but the sealing talismans and the coolness of the cave should at least slow the process.

They walked slowly, until Wei Ying couldn't stand it any longer. "Why?"

Hua Cheng looked bemused. “Pardon?”

“Why are you being so nice to me? We barely know each other, but you still took me grave cleaning and bought me offerings. So... why?”

Hua Cheng looked at him for a long moment.

“Wei Ying. When you first used the die I gave you, I thought it was a prank at first. But then, I heard your voice. So I went to take a look.” Hua Cheng looked him dead in the eyes. “Your death will haunt my dreams for a long time to come, Wei Ying.”

Wei Ying drew in a shaky breath. If he had looked as bad as it felt, being torn to shreds, then... suddenly, he was glad that Hua Cheng hadn’t shown him his body. It must have looked awful.

“Then... how am I still whole? I thought ghosts took on the form they did when they died, or they are twisted by their desires.”

Hua Cheng sighed, tossing the dice and landing them on the streets of Ghost City. He ignored the reverent murmurs, instead paying for a spicy meat skewer that Wei Ying had been meaning to try for some time.

“In some cases, yes. Those ghosts are usually brought back because of strong desires, but you were different. You just... gave up. It took me a while to coax your soul out. I didn’t want to trap you in a rotting body for eternity.”

“How kind. Hua *Chengzhu* made me a new body?” Wei Ying fluttered his eyelashes. “I’m so honoured.”

“You’d be surprised at how easy it is to carve a complete body.”

Wei Ying choked on his food, and when he looked up, Hua Cheng had a cheeky smirk on his face.

“I’m a sculptor, you’re in good hands. In any case, this isn’t a solid body, but a spirit form that you made. All I did was just give you some spiritual energy to speed up the process of your body forming.”

“Spiritual energy?”

Hua Cheng stopped suddenly, and Wei Ying almost ran into him. The Ghost King turned to Wei Ying, an intense look in his eye.

“Did you have any dreams after that?”

Wei Ying turned the question over in his head. Dreams... He did dream of his death a lot, but the ending always seemed to change. Sometimes it could be considered dreams; other times, nightmares.

“Yes.” Wei Ying whispered. “I dreamed of my death. But sometimes, someone saves me. It’s not always the same person, but I feel safe with them.”

“Those aren’t dreams, Wei Ying.” Hua Cheng said softly. “Come with me.”

Hua Cheng led him into Paradise Manor, leading him down a labyrinth of corridors and identical doors until finally, they reached a door that was absolutely plastered with talismans and protective arrays. Wei Ying bounced on the balls of his feet impatiently while Hua Cheng undid the spells and pushed open the door.

His horrifying visage stared back at him.

There were corpses littered around the place, the ground cracked and shattered around the grasping hands. His body had been laid on a stone slab, his arms folded over his stomach and his eyes closed. An array surrounded his body, and Wei Ying thought he was going to throw up.

“I kept your body, in case you had any idea what to do with it.” Hua Cheng reached out, pushing away the grasping hands and draping a dark, heavy cloth over it, reducing it to a silhouette.

“What are the hands?” Wei Ying managed to ask. Was this where he’d woken up time and again, unable to move?

Hua Cheng frowned. “They are spells casted by others, using your body as an anchor. I can’t really stop them from being casted, but they won’t reach your body.”

“Hua *qianbei*, I think-”

“I know.” Hua Cheng nodded. “Your body is still connected to your soul. But there is a way to stop it from happening again.”

“How?” Wei Ying asked a little too eagerly. Anything to stop that waking horror.

Hua Cheng glanced at the shrouded body. “Do you know what ghosts do with our ashes?”

Chapter End Notes

Qingming: A festival where you clean the graves of your ancestors and place fresh flowers and offerings, but in this case, Wei Ying is offering it as a family member.

I was actually debating how to end off this chapter, and ahh, apologies for the cliffhanger, but I promise you that the next chapter will explain away some of the things. I plan to make full use of these few chapters to build up the world, but as of now, mdzs's timeline where Wei Ying is resurrected still has not started. He is still six feet under, dead, gone, completely and utterly dead! Though it won't stay like that for long- but I

should stop talking lest I spoil the entire story in the end notes. Anyways, this fic has become something similar to a character/worldbuilding study of sorts, so I hope you won't mind :D

Haha 69 bookmarks (thank you so much for the number though :0)

Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

whew! Okay, so from here on, there will be some making up of lore on my part. The time between Wei Ying's revival and death can't be all sunshine and daisies, after all. There needs to be some spice! So I will most likely insert a whole story arc for that. It might stretch the story a little, but for the sake of continuity, please suspend your disbelief.

Also, I forgot to mention, but there are timeskips in this fic. It kills me to skip about six years, but I wasn't going to write another tgcf with 1.2mil words (maybe next time). So you get the important, juicy bits!

The hat that Wei Ying's wearing is just like what Xie Lian has, except the veil and hat are all black.

Okay, that's it. Enjoy the chapter!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“Do you know what ghosts do with our ashes?”

Wei Ying shook his head. “No.”

“They are the crux of our existence. If they are destroyed, we cease to exist as a being.” Hua Cheng had explained. “Ghosts have a tradition. If we believe in someone with all our heart, we will give our ashes to our chosen person to protect. It is the ultimate act of trust.”

“Are your ashes in a safe place then?” Wei Ying cried out, alarmed.

Hua Cheng had just smiled. “If the person carrying my ashes is gone, I will not object to my ashes being destroyed either.”

“Oh.” Wei Ying sank into his chair, staring at his physical body. He felt faintly ridiculous, like sitting around a dinner table and waiting for food to be served. Then he remembered how he died, and he revised his thoughts on comparing their setup to a dinner table.

“In any case, most ghosts forge their ashes into something small and light, but some other ghosts will place theirs in an urn. They can’t let go of tradition, I suppose.”

Wei Ying bit his lip, worrying over the very idea of *burning* his corpse. But if he didn’t, then he would be bound to wake up in a nightmare again. It wasn’t a good choice either way, but

there was only one way that he was willing to take.

He took a deep breath, lifting his eyes to meet Hua Cheng's.

"Do you have an area where we can do this?"

Oddly enough, there was a crematorium in Ghost City, on the outskirts of the town. The use was purely ceremonial, Hua Cheng explained as he led Wei Ying past rows and rows of empty furnaces. They didn't actually burn the corpses there, but their ashes would appear here.

They entered a door shaped like one of the furnace doors, and laid Wei Ying's body on the blood red array on the floor, arranging his limbs.

"For this, you will have to play your flute. I'm sure you learned something for raising corpses? All you have to do is to play the reverse. Force your soul to distance itself from your body. Tether it in only the faintest of senses."

Wei Ying thought of the Gusu Lan sect before mentally slapping himself. No, that was not a train of thought he should be entertaining right now! Shakily, he drew out Chenqing and ran through the score he'd written, making amendments for it and changing it to suit his needs.

Absently, he wondered if he could write a book with all of his songs and title it something terrible, like Songs of the Underworld, just for fun. He made a mental note to do that and raised his flute to his lips.

It took a few tries, but soon he was playing fluently again, the haunting music flowing forth. Hua Cheng knelt down, and with a touch, activated the array. The temperature of the room rose, but it was a welcome warmth to the biting chill that Wei Ying always felt.

"You might feel an uncomfortable heat," Hua Cheng warned. "But if you stop playing, I guarantee you'll feel way worse."

First, it was his back. Heat prickled his spine and slowly spread outwards, wrapping around his arms and shoulders. The heat descended down to his legs, and his back hummed with a warmth not unlike the feeling he got when he had been punished in Cloud Recesses.

Ah, that seemed like a lifetime away.

The heat increased, and Wei Ying thought that if he could sweat, his collar would be soaked through with sweat right now. But he just remained uncomfortably warm, and he watched his body smoulder in the array.

With a quick jerk and a snap like a broken tree branch, the edges of his body curled in on itself, looking like a paper likeness of him had been burned. It shrivelled, crumbling into ash within seconds. Not a shard of bone was left.

The heat faded from his back, replaced with a gentle warmth where his core would have been if he was alive. It spread to his chest, and coalesced in his heart.

Hua Cheng waved his hand, and the ashes lifted, tipping themselves neatly into a small urn, which sealed itself and floated into Wei Ying's hands.

"You can do whatever you want with them now, but I suggest you forge them quickly. An urn isn't exactly the easiest thing to carry around." Hua Cheng deactivated the array, stepping out and gesturing for Wei Ying to follow.

"Can I do this myself?" Wei Ying inspected his urn curiously, turning it this way and that. "Forging my ashes, I mean."

"Most ghosts do. It's a very intimate and private affair, and if you let someone look at how you forge your ashes, you trust them a lot."

Wei Ying threw a sidelong glance at Hua Cheng. The ghost king seemed... on edge. His eye was constantly darting around, and his hand rested lightly on E'ming's hilt. Wei Ying looked around furtively, but he could detect nothing out of the ordinary. Was Hua Cheng waiting for someone?

"Hua *qianbei*, are you looking for someone?" Wei Ying asked cautiously.

Hua Cheng removed his hand from E'ming, though he still maintained a tense posture. "I'm not sure what I'm looking for. But there have been several disturbances in Ghost City. They're small, but they don't seem like coincidences."

"What kind of disturbances?"

"Fights, more people entering, squabbles over territory." Hua Cheng ticked them off his fingers. "All commonplace in the Ghost City, but all of these situations have only occurred on the borders. Whenever I visit, there is no sign of any disturbances."

"Of course when Hua *qianbei* appears, all trouble disappears. Who would want to deal with an angry city lord?" Wei Ying sighed. "In the end, they'll all run like naughty children."

"Oh? Are you saying that I should send someone undercover to investigate this for me?"

Wei Ying nodded enthusiastically. "Yes, that's what I mean. Someone who isn't affiliated with you, and they can slip in and out of places easily."

Hua Cheng turned to Wei Ying, his eye glimmering in amusement. "Then, I'll trouble you to investigate this for me. You will be appropriately compensated."

"What- hey, you tricked me into doing your dirty work for you!" Despite Wei Ying's protests, he was excited to finally be able to do something.

"Rest assured, there is no one more qualified than you. If you encounter any trouble, I trust that you can sway public opinion with that spiritual weapon of yours." Hua Cheng nodded to Chengqing.

"I guess..."

“It shouldn’t be that difficult. Those on the border can be human or ghost, but they aren’t the kind to look for trouble. Come, I’ll brief you on what you have to look for.”

“This blows,” Wei Ying muttered under his breath. Hua Cheng had cautioned him against showing his face, so he had donned a hat with a heavy black veil. No one gave him a sidelong glance, which made Wei Ying wonder how outrageous his outfit would have to be to garner looks in Ghost City.

That was an experiment for another time. Now, he strolled along the streets, his eyes sharp and alert. Hua Cheng was right, this was where ghosts and humans lived in peace, but there would always be more ghosts than humans.

A wail broke him out of his thoughts, and he forced himself to maintain his casual stride, checking where the sound came from. Left, from a tiny alleyway. He adjusted his pace, walking into the darkened area.

Almost immediately, someone lunged at him, and Wei Ying barely managed to sidestep it. A body crashed onto the streets, blood splattered over his robes. Wei Ying looked at the figure. Human, wearing plain white robes. No forehead ribbon. He must be a rogue cultivator, then. Or a rich noble.

The man scrambled up, and Wei Ying drew into the shadows, content with watching for now. He rubbed the jade pendant on Chenqing absently, running his fingers along the sigils he had carved. It had taken a while to pick something small, but who would ever suspect a small jade ornament to be the source of his ashes?

“You-! Just because you’re from one of the Great Sects doesn’t give you the right to bully us like this!” The man in white spluttered, scrambling to his feet and lifting his sword.

“You stole.”

That voice sent cold water trickling down Wei Ying’s back. Oh no.

A figure clad in white stepped out of the shadows, and Wei Ying pressed himself closer to the wall. Lan Zhan stepped forward, his expression as inscrutable as ever.

“You’re trying to slander me now?”

“I do not lie. Return it.”

Wei Ying’s lips parted. Oh. Were all these fights by the same person? Has Lan Zhan been chasing down this man for the past few days now? But why was he here? Ghost City was nowhere near any settlements, unless...

“I’m not returning it! It’s mine!” The man’s voice rose to a fever pitch, and he barely noticed when Wei Ying started to move. But Lan Zhan noticed, and a sword was pressed against Wei Ying’s throat in an instance.

“Speak.”

Wei Ying shook his head, stepping away from the sword. If he spoke, the gig was up. He didn't want Lan Zhan to find out he was a ghost.

"Who are you?" Lan Zhan's eyes narrowed.

Wei Ying hesitated, before sweeping into a bow. He stepped out of the alley, kneeling down by the man.

"If you value your life, I advise you to return what you stole," Wei Ying murmured. "Hua *Chengzhu* is not forgiving if you steal."

"I- I didn't steal anything."

Wei Ying sighed and rocked back on his heels. At least he could do some fieldwork. He withdrew a talisman and stuck it onto the man's chest, then whispered the code word. It flashed red once, then settled into a steady orange glow.

"Did you, or did you not steal?" He whispered.

"I didn't!" The paper flashed red.

"Did you come from Paradise Manor?"

"No!" A green flash.

"Did you steal from Hua Chengzhu?"

"No, I didn't, you have to believe me!" A green flash.

He stole from someone else, he didn't take it from Paradise Manor or Hua Cheng. So was it from one of the ghosts? If so, he would have become soup ingredients long ago already. The ghosts here were wildly possessive over their items, which was understandable. Some of them might be long lost family heirlooms, or gifts from their beloved.

Out of sheer habit, Wei Ying turned to Lan Zhan, who seemed to be frozen in shock by the talisman on the man's chest. Wei Ying turned back, inspecting it again. It was just an altered talisman, there was nothing wrong with it. He plucked it off and exchanged the talisman for a binding one, hauling the man up.

He waved to Lan Zhan, then set off with the man, keeping silent until the weight of Lan Zhan's eyes slowly petered off.

He breathed a sigh of relief.

At least he wouldn't see Lan Zhan ever again.

Hua Cheng wasn't pleased with the appearance of a thief, but he sent his people to guide the man into a cell, where he could be questioned again later.

"Truth revealing talismans?" Hua Cheng raised an eyebrow. "Is that what all those explosions were about?"

Wei Ying ducked his head modestly, his fingers worrying at the edge of his hat. "It's just a few pet projects."

"Oh, that reminds me. Gege asked you to go and find him. He has something he needs your help with."

It was the first time in six years that he left Ghost City. Xie Lian had requested his assistance at Puqi Shrine, but when he'd arrived there, the god had admitted that he thought Wei Ying would like some time outside of Ghost City.

"It gets a little overwhelming after a while," Xie Lian said with a sympathetic smile. "Sometimes you just have to take some time away. I've talked to San Lang about this, he's okay with it. You can stay here if you want, Puqi Shrine has a few rooms at the back."

Something told Wei Ying that Hua Cheng had been incredibly reluctant, and it was Xie Lian who talked him out of it.

Still, he was glad to have some time away from the hustle and bustle of Ghost City, and he helped Xie Lian redecorate the shrine, removing the more gaudy and garish parts of the temple.

The rest of the village soon caught on to the arrival of a newcomer, and they came over eagerly, welcoming him to their village. Wei Ying kept the hat on, seeing as there was talk of cultivators passing through their village.

Xie Lian, he discovered, had strange friends. A few days later, Xie Lian rushed in, looking harassed and worried. He had a grimy looking man attached to his arm, who he led to a chair.

"Wei Ying, could you fetch me some water? Qingxuan, hold on a bit, okay?"

There was a small river nearby, and Wei Ying practically flew there, fuelled by fear and anxiety. He slopped some water over the floor when he came back, but Qingxuan grabbed the bucket, drinking like a dying man. Xie Lian wiped away the grime on his face gently, coaxing him to drink slower.

"Xie *da-ge*?" Wei Ying called. "Who is this?"

"He's an old friend. I hope you can take care of him for now." Xie Lian's face was grim.

"Trouble is brewing."

Truth talismans! I'm going to really be exploring the limitations of Wei Wuxian's powers and inventive ability, since I believe that he's got a sharp mind for these sort of things. If he hadn't died, he'd be kind of like a daedalus style inventor. He invented a new way of cultivating and new trinkets, who's to say he won't play around with truth talismans and, idk, gps talismans that pinpoint your location for you?

Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

I forget to put this all the time, but please note that this follows HoB's post canon. So if you don't want to be spoiled, please look away. It'll still somewhat follow mdzs's storyline, but with a few tweaks to make it fit both worlds. With this chapter, we officially enter the mdzs story line! And it only took us... 17.2k words! Youchie, this fic might be a little big- very big, actually, so I hope you'll stick around!

This chapter's slightly longer than the rest (clocking in at about 3.2k words), but it felt wrong to split it up, you know? Alright, enough talk. I've been dreaming of this end scene for so long now, so I won't keep you!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Qingxuan had to rest for a whole day before he could gather himself to string together a coherent sentence. By that time, Xie Lian and Hua Cheng had already had an entire conversation, translated through brief brushes of skin, a slight furrow of the brows and imperceptible shakes of their heads.

Wei Ying gathered that some sort of disturbance was happening at a volcano, and said disturbance was not meant to happen.

Finally, Qingxuan croaked out a single word.

“He-”

“Qingxuan? Qingxuan! Are you feeling alright?”

To Wei Ying’s utter surprise, the man burst out in hysterical laughter, though that soon devolved into a coughing fit.

“I saw him! I saw, I saw big brother. Oh my gods, oh my god, I didn’t expect to see him there. I scared myself halfway to hell, hahahahaha...”

Xie Lian blinked. “Shi Wudu? The Water Tyrant?”

“Yes! My brother! I could finally see his face! But he kept frowning at me, telling me to dress properly. I told him I was a beggar, and then he disappeared. Ahh, this isn’t good, is this because Tonglu is moving?”

“How do you know about that?” Hua Cheng said sharply.

Qingxuan laughed nervously. “Ah, Crimson Rain, word travels fast on the streets, and no one pays attention to a cripple like me. It’s easy to listen to all kinds of news.”

There was a long pause, and Wei Ying used this time to quickly marshall his thoughts. Tonglu seemed to be a volcano of some sort, and it was very, very bad news. From what he could tell, it wasn’t supposed to be active, which was why it was so problematic.

“Hua *qianbei* , Xie *da-ge* . Where is this Tonglu mountain located?” Wei Ying asked.

“Mount Tonglu is constantly shifting, the boundaries expanding and shrinking. But it always stays around the eastern area. Why do you ask?”

East. It was technically close to the Nightless City, but Wei Ying had never heard of a volcano in that region. However, it was always warmer than usual there, so perhaps it wouldn’t be too far of a stretch.

“Can I come with you? I want to see this mountain for myself.”

“Take me too! I don’t want to know what would happen if Big Brother found me when I was alone, no...”

The mountains walked.

No matter how much they moved towards it, it stayed the same distance away, taunting them. Xie Lian cheerfully announced that this mountain had not changed one bit, and politely asked if they could enter.

A quick twist of nausea later, and they were inside. Qingxuan, to his credit, was fluttering his fan nervously, but his eyes were bright and alert, darting this way and that.

All of a sudden, they heard voices, hushed syllables that floated faintly to them. Wei Ying’s eyes grew wide under his hat, and he grabbed Hua Cheng’s arm.

“Hua *qianbei* , if I see anyone I know, I’m a mute ghost working for you.” As soon as these words passed between his lips, the voices drew closer, and Wei Ying released Hua Cheng’s arm like he had been scalded, arranging his posture so that he would draw the least attention to himself.

And not a moment too soon, since Lan Xichen stepped out of the brush, followed by—good gods, why was his luck so bad?—Lan Zhan and Nie Mingjue. An odd group, but one with good combative abilities. They must be here for something important then.

“Who are you?” Nie Mingjue spoke first, glancing at all of them with open suspicion.

Hua Cheng swept into a low bow, a charming smile on his face. “Sect Leader Nie. My name is Hua Cheng, and this is my husband, Xie Lian. This is Qingxuan-”

“-actually, I go by A-Feng now.”

“-this is A-Feng.”

Nie Mingjue glanced at Wei Ying warily, and he inclined his head towards the Sect Leader.

“Who is that?”

“One of my subordinates. He will be taking care of A-Feng while we deal with Tonglu mountain.”

Lan Xichen stepped forward. “Honoured one, how did you know Sect Leader Nie’s identity?”

Hua Cheng waved the question away. “I have my ways. I assume you are here to investigate the mountain too?”

“Yes.” Nie Mingjue said begrudgingly. “We’ve received rumours of beasts lurking here, and we’ve come to take a look.”

Hua Cheng made a noncommittal sound, and Xie Lian nodded decisively. “Then we can all join together. Numbers mean strength in these parts.”

“Who said we were joining forces with you?”

“Sect Leader Nie, have you been around Mount Tonglu? Do you know the sort of things that appear here?” Xie Lian still kept a pleasant expression on his face, but the cultivators were looking more and more apprehensive.

Well, except for Lan Zhan, of course.

“I-”

“No, you won’t know what hits you when they come for you.” Xie Lian continued genially, walking forward until he was standing right in front of Nie Mingjue. The sect leader was taller, but at that moment, Xie Lian towered over him.

“That’s why you need us! We’re experienced guides, so we know shortcuts to get to the mountain. San Lang and I are also experienced in this sort of stuff, as is A-Feng and Wu Ming.”

Hua Cheng and Wei Ying both raised an eyebrow at the assignment of names, but did not complain. Wei Ying supposed he was technically a nameless ghost, after all. It would take some time to get used to being referred to as Wu Ming.

“Daozhang, forgive this one’s insolence. We gladly welcome your presence on our trip. Shall we tell you what we are looking for?”

Xie Lian clapped his hands. “No need! We just have to find Guoshi. He can tell us about this place and what has changed. San Lang, could you...”

“Alright, gege.” Hua Cheng retrieved his dice and tossed them, bowing towards the cultivators.

“After you, gentlemen.” Nie Mingjue looked gobsmacked, but he walked through the array first, followed by Lan Xichen, then Lan Zhan.

“San Lang...” Xie Lian sighed, a fond smile tugging at his lips.

Wei Ying expected many things, but it was not a large cavern, where a pillar of stone seemed to be supporting the whole room. There was the sound of shuffling cards, and Wei Ying thought he heard murmurs.

A man sat in a circle with three other people, surrounding a set of playing cards. As they walked closer, they heard what he was saying.

“Oh, I have a good hand this time, this is most wonderful-”

“Guoshi. It’s nice to see you again.” Xie Lian greeted pleasantly, and the man jumped violently, knocking over his companions. Nie Mingjue muttered a curse, and Wei Ying realised why. The companions weren’t humans at all, but extremely lifelike dolls, with words drawn on their chest and eerily realistic faces painted on.

“Crown Prince! Oh, and you’ve brought guests. Are you here to visit Jun Wu? I’m afraid he’s not moved at all.” Guoshi waved towards the stone pillar, and Wei Ying gaped.

There was a man pinned under the stone—no, it was as though the stone had grown around his torso, pinning him to the ground. The source of the murmurs came from the three smaller faces on his face, who whispered to each other quietly.

Wei Ying fought down the urge to speak and instead turned to Xie Lian, imbuing his finger with spiritual energy and writing a few words in the air.

Who is he?

“That... That’s the former Heavenly Emperor, Jun Wu. He’s sealed here, and with it, Tonglu’s power to create Ghost Kings. That’s why it’s so concerning.”

“Tonglu is waking again?” Guoshi looked up sharply. “So soon?”

“It shouldn’t even be able to wake. Sect Leader Nie, could I trouble you to tell us what the rumours you received entailed?” Hua Cheng had an inscrutable expression on his face, and Nie Mingjue studied him for a long time before relenting.

“Mostly ghosts of the past. Deceased family, friends, spouses. They don’t do much, but if you get three reports from the same village talking of deceased relatives coming back to life, they tend to catch your eye.”

“Gusu Lan received a different set of reports. We learnt that the-”

What Gusu Lan knew, the group would never know, because at this exact moment, the mountain groaned as though it was in pain. The temperature rose palpably, and they could hear rocks skittering about.

“Get out of here now.” Guoshi warned. “I suggest you go and see for yourself what’s going on. This old man won’t be able to tell you much, that’s for sure. I’m usually around the foot of the mountains, so I won’t have seen anything strange.”

Another rumble cut off all conversation prompts, and Hua Cheng tossed his dice again.

Nothing happened.

“San Lang? This isn’t the time for jokes.”

“It’s not a trick.” Hua Cheng said, his eye wide. “Gege, Mount Tonglu has started up again. Teleportation arrays won’t work now.”

“Ruoye!” In an instant, the bandages around Xie Lian’s wrists and arms loosened, shooting towards everyone in the room save for Guoshi and Jun Wu. Hua Cheng burst into a swarm of butterflies, and Xie Lian shouted one word.

“Run!”

They didn’t need to be told twice. With the rumbles of the mountain getting closer and closer, they sprinted up a steep flight of stairs carved into the side of the cavern, Hua Cheng’s butterflies lighting the way for them. Xie Lian pulled them along, so all they really needed to do was to jump up the stairs.

They tumbled out, falling on top of each other in a small, homey cottage. The butterflies clamoured together, forming Hua Cheng’s shape again.

“Why- why is this stupid mountain open again!” Qingxuan was the first to speak, scrambling to his feet. “Didn’t we suffer enough that time?”

“With all due respect, A-Feng, if we knew, we would be on our way to stop it already.” Hua Cheng brushed silvery dust off his clothes, looking like the reopening of a ghost forge was just a minor inconvenience.

“Forgive my bluntness, but who are you two? I’ve not seen cultivators who can explode into butterflies and reform.” Lan Xichen said warily.

“Yes, please enlighten us. Who are you exactly, and how do you know this place so well? And that... that thing down there! What the hell is that?” Nie Mingjue spluttered.

Xie Lian sighed. “If I said that I am a god from the Heavens, and that San Lang here is a Ghost King who wields unimaginable power, would you believe me? Would that make any difference?”

“I believe you.”

All heads turned to look at Lan Zhan, who gazed steadily at Xie Lian.

“What?” Xie Lian looked gobsmacked.

“I have exchanged blows with you. The style is similar to one I have read in books, from an ancient city. There is power and ease behind your strikes, suggesting familiarity. Hua *Chengzhu* has demonstrated his power several times.”

Hua Cheng burst into laughter. “Why, Second Master Lan, you’re so quick witted! In any case, we all want this mountain to be sealed, don’t we? So ghost, god, or human, let’s just get along for now, hm?”

“Hua *Chengzhu* is most astute. Then, if you’d please lead us to Mount Tonglu, we would be very grateful.” Lan Xichen allowed.

“Now that transportation arrays no longer work, we have to proceed on foot. Thankfully, Tonglu isn’t that far from here; it’s only about three days’ walk, if we hurry.” Hua Cheng pointed out of the window, where the volcano smouldered.

“No time to waste, let’s go.” Nie Mingjue strode out of the cottage, and the rest of the group trooped out.

The journey was smooth, with almost no demons or ghosts around, despite the steadily increasing resentful energy in the air. Nie Mingjue and Lan Xichen noticed it too, and the former muttered something about the Yiling Patriarch.

Wei Ying rolled his eyes under his veil. Talk about blackening his name. He shook his head, and Lan Zhan turned to him

Luckily, he’d taken to wearing his hat around, so Lan Zhan probably believed his story of a ghost working for Hua Cheng, and not Wei Wuxian. Still, Lan Zhan’s intense scrutiny was... discomfiting, to say the least.

Silently, Wei Ying cursed his luck. His first time stepping out of Ghost City, and he runs into Lan Zhan. Still, it was interesting to see him in bright light. Lan Zhan looked older, more weathered. He still wore the white mourning robes, but his guqin now accompanied him on his trips.

Old habits die hard, and Wei Ying had to consciously rein in his words around Lan Zhan. In the end, he discreetly applied a silencing talisman on his body, and used lingering resentful energy to write in the air. Hua Cheng and Xie Lian played along, waiting for him to write his response down whenever they asked him something.

He learnt that Lan Zhan was here to investigate a series of demonic cultivation tools, each one having their resentful energy siphoned away here.

Lan Zhan didn’t seem to question his reluctance to speak, but instead went along with it. Wei Ying found himself scribbling essays in the air, telling Lan Zhan what he saw in the Ghost

City, while the other man hummed his answers.

They must have made an odd pair, but no one was looking.

Finally, they reached the top of the mountain, and at once, they saw the problem.

The depths of the volcano were smouldering, and they could almost taste the resentful energy in the air.

Hua Cheng looked down into the depths, as did Xie Lian. They appeared to be taking measurements, conferring quietly.

Wei Ying busied himself with the resentful energy, collecting spools of it in his hands and drawing protective talismans with them. The air around him crackled with prepared spells, and he sent the bulk of it to Qingxuan, who was resting his feet.

They almost missed it.

The shaking started almost imperceptibly, but soon, they could barely keep their balance, the ground swaying like a ship's deck in a storm.

“What is happening now?” Nie Mingjue demanded, grabbing Lan Xichen and preventing him from falling into the volcano.

“The volcano is going to erupt! If we don't stop the flow of resentful energy right now, nothing good will come out of it!”

“Curse Wei Wuxian! His soul must be inside-”

“This has nothing to do with Wei Ying, Sect Leader Nie.” Hua Cheng snarled, his eye flashing dangerously. “Do not implicate an innocent man.”

Nie Mingjue's words struck a chord within him. Resentful energy. He could control it, couldn't he? He had invented demonic cultivation, this would be simple enough. Quickly, he sifted through his talismans, drawing the Spirit Summoning Array on them. He made a few adjustments, allowing them to not only draw resentful energy to them, but hold it.

He had twenty. That was barely enough to remove even a drop of the energy. But he had his body.

So he lifted his flute and began to play.

It was like Nie Mingjue had been struck dumb. He stopped shouting, turning towards Wei Ying with a look of shock, which transformed into mounting rage.

“Wei Wuxian! You-” The rest of Nie Mingjue's words were cut off, and the world faded to just him, the howls of resentful energy, and the flute cutting into his frostbitten lips.

The resentful energy filled the talismans far too quickly, and they burned to a crisp. Left with nowhere to go, they flooded Wei Ying's body, filling his veins with liquid ice until he fell to

one knee.

But still he played. He could not stop playing, otherwise they would all die.

“Wei Ying!”

Lan Zhan’s voice snapped him out of his reverie, and he stopped playing.

“Hey, Lan Zhan. It’s been a while.” His frozen, frostbitten fingers fumbled with the jade pendant on his flute, and he finally detached it, pressing it into Lan Zhan’s hands (they burned with a flame that Wei Ying longed to press to his cheek).

“Wei Ying.” His name was a warning, a welcome, and a plea. Lan Zhan did always have a way with words.

Wei Ying forced his lips to obey him, smiling bitterly at Lan Zhan. “My life is in your hands now, Lan Zhan. Take care of me, okay?”

“Don’t.” Lan Zhan’s eyes were wide and his lips were parted slightly, as though he wanted to say more. Wei Ying wanted to cry, but his tears froze on his cheeks.

“I-” His tongue was leaden, and his words failed. So he kept playing, pulling more and more resentful energy into his soul, even as his skin split and his body started shaking uncontrollably. But it wasn’t enough.

Wei Ying had hoped it wouldn’t come to this, but deep down, he had known. Drawing out the resentful energy wouldn’t pacify the volcano, and he had heard enough stories from Hua Cheng to know what had to happen.

So he bowed and passed the flute to Nie Mingjue, who took it from him numbly. His legs had lost feeling, and he crawled to the edge of the volcano, struggling to his feet. At least this time, he had the luxury of choosing how he died.

And there was no greater honour than dying for those you cared for.

Hua Cheng and Xie Lian were looking at him with identical expressions of horror, and Qingxuan had an expression of shock and something else, like he was seeing someone else instead of Wei Ying.

Xie Lian’s lips moved soundlessly, and Hua Cheng seemed to be holding onto his waist tightly—though if it was for Hua Cheng’s sake or Xie Lian’s sake, Wei Ying wasn’t sure.

Lan Zhan took a step forward. Wei Ying took a step back—

“Wei Ying!” His heart twisted brutally when he heard the raw pain in Lan Zhan’s voice. He hoped Lan Zhan could understand that he was sorry.

—and he fell into the starless abyss.

The last thing he felt was cold, then nothing.

Chapter End Notes

daozhang: basically an honorific to refer to cultivators, hehe

- info dump below -

Zowie mama, you do not know the lengths I went to for this fic. Did you know, they never mentioned anything about the locations of Nightless City and Tonglu mountain (at least not outright, or if it was implied, I probably missed it)? So, I had to take things into my own hands.

I made the Nightless City be in the east, because they were the "Sun", and the sun rises from the East. I sincerely believe they would be vain enough to do this. In the donghua, the area is filled with prey during their nighthunts and in the web series, the place is smoking like a volcanic plain, so it wouldn't be far off to assume that there was a volcano nearby.

Not to mention the fact that there is a sort of poetic justice that the Wens' city fell close to Wuyong, don't you think?

Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

Okay, so my brain is a little fried from watching both the donghua and the web series, so you know what I'm going to do? Invent my own series of events. Sure, it'll still follow the actual storyline (very closely, I might add), novel, donghua and the web series, but I'll be cherry picking out the parts that can fit into the story.

tldr, I'm rewriting canon to fit this silly little crossover that I came up with on a whim.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Wei Ying had expected never to wake again. And that was fine by him. He was just so tired, and his days as a ghost were probably never meant to last long, anyway.

He dreamed, in that cold abyss.

He dreamed that he was back in Cloud Recesses. The sun was shining, and the days were soft and idyllic. He was back with Jiang Cheng, his shijie, *everyone* was back.

Lan Zhan ignored him, but scolded him for leaving the premises for Emperor's Smile. They'd fight, and then Lan Zhan would throw him dirty looks whenever he approached the man. But he kept good secrets.

Wei Ying liked this dream. He woke up, went to classes, spent the afternoon goofing off, then at night, he snuck down to the village, which had turned into Lotus Pier. Sometimes, Lan Zhan joined him. He'd tease Lan Zhan mercilessly, but then he'd see Jiang Cheng and Yanli, and he'd run to join them.

It was a good dream.

But then he heard whispers. A young man, standing at the corner of his dreams. Always watching, with a hopeful gleam in his eyes. He looked so lonely. So Wei Ying extended a hand to him.

“What's your name?”

There was a flicker of doubt in the man's eyes. But then he grasped the proffered hand.

“My name is Mo Xuanyu. And I need your help.”

Ah. He should've known. Wei Wuxian can't have nice things, even in death.

“Wake up! Oh heavens above, you look like a hanged ghost!”

Wei Ying blinked, the sound of shattering furniture echoing in his ears. Everything was so loud, but he tried to sit up. He was kicked back down, and he felt the impact rattle him.

“Young master, we’ve broken everything in this place.”

“So soon?”

“With all due respect, young master, he has very few possessions.”

“Hmph! That’ll teach you to tell on me, you lunatic!” Another kick delivered to his ribs for good measure, and Wei Ying finally managed to open his eyes enough to glimpse a deeply unpleasant face.

Oh heavens above give him strength, he wasn’t going to be able to look at that face any longer than half a shichen without either bursting into tears or laughing. He closed his eyes and lay back down, but that just earned him another kick.

His stomach was really going to bruise at this rate, and he dry heaved, his stomach convulsing.

“What-?” Wei Ying rasped, and the voice that came out was definitely *not* his. Okay, this was weird.

“Oh? You’re talking?”

Wei Ying was suddenly aware of the tacky feeling on his chest, arms and floor, and the metallic smell confirmed it as blood. The puzzle pieces fell into place. Somehow, this man had gotten hold of one of his manuscripts, where he had theorised the summoning of a soul via forcible ejection of the summoner’s soul.

But it had remained a theory for a reason, for goodness’ sake! What was this person thinking? Revenge? Summoning Wei Wuxian? Just because he had a reputation that painted him as a monstrous figure?

What a madman. Wei Ying was almost tempted to clap, but another kick sent him sprawling. A thin thread of anger wormed its way into his heart, and he stopped moving, listening to what the two had to say.

“Come on. We can’t waste time on this lunatic, we’ve got important visitors coming.” Wei Ying struggled to his feet after the door slammed shut, and he took stock of his surroundings. From what he could tell, it looked like he lived in a woodshed, but most of the furniture was broken.

He sighed. “The Yiling Patriarch comes back into the land of the living; not amongst riches and lavish silks, but in a crudely drawn blood circle, surrounded by hay and filth. It must be my bad karma from my previous life.”

There was a series of knocks on the door.

“Stop muttering to yourself in there, it’s creepy!” A voice shouted, loud and annoyed, and Wei Ying made a face at the door. Goodness, he couldn’t even voice his thoughts out loud? What a strict household.

He could almost smell the faint fragrance of lotuses.

His stomach interrupted his thoughts, and he groaned quietly. This body hadn’t practised inedia yet, and he silently lamented the fact that he might die even before leaving this pigsty of a room.

Wait. He’s human. Wei Ying closed his eyes, taking internal stock of his body. He had been forced into the body of a lunatic, apparently, and the last thing he remembered was- it was-

He died, didn’t he? He’d fallen into Mount Tonglu to stop the volcano from erupting, and he was supposed to either die, or become a Ghost King. Yet here he was, standing in the body of a human. That was an interesting concept. He’d have to talk to Hua Cheng about that.

The memories were trickling back slowly now, but the cuts on his body throbbed, scrambling his thoughts. They were healing, but far too slowly for his liking. His robes were also crusted with blood, and he looked around for some water that he could use to clean himself off a little.

After poking around the ruins of the hut, he found a trough of water that did not look like it should be placed anywhere near his face. He did, however, notice that his face had been powdered, and that rouge had been applied unevenly around his eyes. No wonder they had said he looked like a hanged ghost.

Ah, but they said he was a lunatic, wasn’t he? And this kind of spell... the former owner must want something.

“Mo Xuanyu! Are you going to eat or not?”

At the mention of food, Wei Ying’s stomach gave a mutinous grumble, and he slouched over to the door. A small tray was pushed through a gap, and Wei Ying stared at the food.

Even the dogs in Ghost City were fed better than this! A small bowl of rice, straggly vegetables and something that was probably supposed to be soup, but looked more like the scum off the top of an actual soup.

Wei Ying resolved to go outside and find better food than this drivel that he was supposed to be eating. He pushed against the door gently at first, then harder, until he shoved the door open and stepped out, squinting at the bright sunlight.

“Hey! Get back in there!”

Wei Ying looked down, realising that there were two people groaning in pain on the floor. Oh dear, had he hit them?

“Mo Xuanyu! Go back into your room, there are guests coming over!”

Wei Ying grinned. “Guests? I have to go and see! Bye bye!”

And with that, he took off, laughing at their indignant shouts. Okay, maybe his situation wasn’t so bad. He could just complete the revenge that Mo Xuanyu wanted him to do, then get his ass back down to Ghost City and spend the rest of his life—er, death?—there.

But a small part of him longed to find Mount Tonglu again. It had been so peaceful in there, suspended in the cocoon of a familiar dream. The larger part of his mind quashed the minority ruthlessly.

But maybe someday. He could almost *hear* Tonglu, whispering to him not unlike the resentful energy that Wei Ying once wielded.

Come back. We are not done with you. We have secrets to share with you.

“One day,” he murmured, turning to face the east. “I’ll come back. I’ll finish what I started.”

But today, he had to get out of here with this body first. Mo Xuanyu, Mo Xuanyu. Summoning him back was one thing, but read the instructional manual, for heaven’s sake! What was he supposed to be doing? There were four scars on his forearm, which meant he had to do... something to four people. That servant and the unsightly man were probably two of them, so who were the other two?

His mother? His father? A slighted lover? No, Mo Xuanyu didn’t seem like the type to summon a supposedly vengeful ghost and tell them to kill someone who rejected him. He heard clamouring from the main hall and walked that way, looking inside. A group of young boys, about fifteen were sitting there, listening to a woman who sat beside a man, presumably her husband.

“-thank you venerable cultivators, we actually have someone in our household who practices cultivation-”

“Ah, that’s me! Excuse me, excuse me!” Wei Ying jumped out of the crowd, almost tripping over the threshold and sprawling across the floor. He heard a barely concealed snort of laughter, but the woman looked livid.

“What is *he* doing here? How did he get out?” She whispered furiously to her husband, then plastered a sickly sweet smile on her face and turned to the cultivators. “Apologies, young masters. This is my sister’s son, and he’s a little... off, you see. Please don’t mind what he says.”

“Why not? Your son stole from me! I’m not leaving until I get it back.” Wei Ying lay face down on the floor, squirming out of the harried servant’s hands and rushing behind one of the cultivators.

“Stole from you? You’re relatives, can’t you let your cousin share some of your things?” The woman huffed. “We share things in this household, Mo Xuanyu. You ungrateful brat.”

At this exact moment, the young man who insulted him rushed into the main hall, and Wei Ying had to scramble out of the way to avoid being trampled.

“Mom, he bullied me! He used those- those unscrupulous dark arts to mess with me!” He sobbed.

Ah. So that was Madam Mo. Wei Ying chanced a glance at the cultivators and quietly bemoaned his fate. Just his luck! They were from Gusu Lan, but a quick scan showed no sign of Lan Zhan. At least the gods were generous enough to grant him that.

Oh, right. The act.

Wei Ying cleared his throat and pointed at the young master, “I didn’t bully you! You kicked me! I was just minding my own business! If you don’t give me back what you stole from me, I’ll take an arm from you!”

Collective gasps were heard from mother and son, and Wei Ying understood where he was not wanted. He pulled a face at them and beat a hasty retreat, rushing off to a secluded corner of the courtyard, where he made use of a fish pond to wash the makeup off his face.

Under the white powder and the rouge, Mo Xuanyu didn’t have a bad looking face, and privately, Wei Ying wondered what the makeup was for. Did he think it looked good? Wei Ying could probably apply makeup better than Mo Xuanyu when he was drunk and in total darkness.

Absently, he hoped that Hua Cheng could find some way to return this body to its rightful owner. Mo Xuanyu was harmless, and Wei Ying did feel genuinely bad for taking over, even if he was offered this willingly.

A familiar wisp of chill brushed against his cheekbones, and he snapped his head up. A familiar sight greeted him: flags with blood red sigils painted on them, embossed on a black background.

Spirit Lure Flags.

Wei Ying scoffed. The cultivation world shunned him, but they still used his creations? These things were weak, and privately, he thought of the things he’d done in Ghost City with his original flags. Just a couple of them were enough to compel ghosts and demons to move towards it, and he had secretly helped out a few ailing stalls by hiding these inside and watching customers flock in.

But for weak spirits, these ones would do.

“Young master Mo, sorry to bother you, but could you leave? We’re going to perform the exorcism soon, and it isn’t safe to be out here.”

Wei Ying glanced over, just in time to watch one of the disciples elbow the one who spoke.

“Sizhui! This guy’s insane, you heard Madam Mo. Just chase him away.”

“We still have to treat him with respect.” Sizhui retorted, then turned to Wei Ying, who had watched this go down with some measure of amusement.

“Will you be working alone then?” Wei Ying glanced at the flags. “Sounds very dangerous.”

“We should be fine. Thank you for your concern, but you really must get going. It’s almost sundown now.”

Satisfied, Wei Ying left, making a silent promise to himself to protect these little disciples. So young, and they were already conducting exorcisms on their own? When he was their age, he was busy whiling away his time in Cloud Recesses!

Wei Ying shook his head wistfully. “Lan Zhan, you really work these kids to the bone, don’t you?”

“-Lang? San Lang?”

Hua Cheng groaned incoherently, struggling to sit back up. His brush had splattered across the paper, completely ruining the calligraphy that he had been practising.

“Gege?”

“San Lang. What happened?”

Hua Cheng shook his head slowly. “I don’t know. It was like Mount Tonglu opened again, but this time, it’s not affecting me. Or any ghosts, for that matter.”

Xie Lian stilled, and Hua Cheng knew what he was thinking.

“Do you think...?”

“It’s likely. Likely, but the chances are still small.” Hua Cheng allowed. He didn’t want to be the one who burst Xie Lian’s hopeful bubble, but he couldn’t stop himself from hoping as well.

He could never get the image of Wei Ying’s frostbitten body falling into Tonglu, and the ebb of energy as Wei Ying took it all into his body.

But for now, all they could do was hope.

Chapter End Notes

Mo Xuanyu deserved so much better and this fic will make sure of that, or heaven strike me down where I sit >:T

Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

Whew, okay, some warnings for this one. There is a scene where Madam Mo briefly attempts to strangle Wei Ying, but he thinks that it is a fierce corpse from his past doing it to him, so warnings for mild panic attacks for this one. I will add warnings if there is anything in the chapter that requires tagging, but there will be themes of grappling with suicidal feelings.

Also, you may notice that some things are missing, like the perspective of others. This is because it will be mainly from Wei Ying and Hua Cheng's perspective, and they can't exactly be omnipotent.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Wei Ying woke to the sound of screams, and for a single, terrifying moment, he was back in the war. He reached for Chengqing, but his hand grasped the empty air. Panic rose in his throat, thick and bitter, but he forced it down and tried to anchor himself.

He stilled, his whole body quivering with nerves. This current body held none of his original body's strength, both spiritual and physical, but Wei Ying was confident he could at least put up a fight.

So he stepped out of the room and headed to the courtyard, looking around warily. The Spirit Lure flags were glowing dimly, and Wei Ying looked at the main hall. The lights were on. Good, so they were still alive.

So where were the screams coming from?

Wei Ying had made a full round around the courtyard, but he didn't see anyone at all. He did it again, this time combing the edges.

There, he found young master Mo's body, half buried in the foliage. Wei Ying dropped to a crouch, inspecting the body carefully. His body was shrivelled like he had aged decades, and Wei Ying muttered a quick prayer for him.

"Young master Mo, I suppose this is karma for your crimes against Mo Xuanyu. It's a shame. Death isn't a good look on you. Though I guess it isn't your fault- ah, but you didn't listen to the cultivators, did you?" Wei Ying lectured.

The corpse reeked of resentful energy, and if he had to hazard a guess, it might have something to do with his strange obsession with stealing what Wei Ying assumed to be

cultivation tools.

He sighed, folding his arms around his legs, but a quiet whimper startled him into falling back on the grass.

“You- you lunatic!”

Too late, Wei Ying realised he had an audience, and before he could even muster the words to deny his involvement, the servant had run away, screaming bloody murder. How incompetent, this was clearly a bloodless murder!

Wei Ying chuckled a little at his own joke, but he stopped laughing when he heard Madam Mo’s wails of grief. She cradled the body gently, and Wei Ying shrunk into the shadows, trying to slink away-

“You bastard, I should’ve killed you-~!” Claws wrapped around his throat, and Wei Ying gasped soundlessly, the visage of a fierce corpse in front of him. It screamed at him, but all he could do was sputter soundlessly oh god why was it there where was he please just kill him quickly-

“Madam Mo, please calm down!” The hands were wrenched away from him, and Wei Ying drew in a deep, shuddering breath, grounding himself. He was at Mo Manor. He was stuck in the body of Mo Xuanyu, a lunatic. He was alive. This was not a dream.

“Calm down? The murderer of my son is right in front of me! I want him dead!” The woman screamed, clearly driven mad by the loss of her son.

One of the boys—Sizhui, if Wei Ying remembered correctly—stepped forward. “Madam, this... this cannot be the work of a human. His flesh and energy were sucked dry.”

“Did you not hear my son in the halls today? Mo Xuanyu practises the dark arts! He- he probably has a pet out here that does his bidding!” Madam Mo howled, going limp in the servant’s arms.

Wei Ying rolled his eyes internally. Good grief, just because your son said so, the sun will rise in the north? Truly, what a spoiled child.

“Madam Mo, this is the cause of your son’s death.” Sizhui was holding the tattered remnants of a Spirit Lure flag, and Wei Ying nodded to himself. That explained the chill clinging to young master Mo. He probably stole one of the flags for himself, and the spirits swarmed him, seeing as he was a weaker entity than the cultivators.

A thought occurred to him and quickly, he pulled up his sleeve. Sure enough, one of the marks was gone, replaced with a silvery scar. So young master Mo was one of them. He guessed that Madam Mo, her husband and that servant would be the other three.

This was because of a technicality, since the Spirit Lure flags were his invention. He really had to rewrite that manuscript, it was going to be a pain in the ass if someone else summoned

another soul incorrectly. He had to sleuth all of Mo Xuanyu's wishes out! What sort of ritual is that?

"You useless cultivators! What did I hire you for, huh? You can't even protect my son! He's just a child!"

Wei Ying was snapped out of his reverie by Madam Mo's screaming. At a loss, she released her grief and anguish onto the poor Lan disciples. And yet they just stood there, taking the verbal lashings. Good gods above, these people were so emotionally constipated that they would just let people step all over them.

Now, Wei Ying was a very responsible elder, no matter what everyone else said. So he stepped away from the railings that he had been lounging against and clapped once, for attention.

"A child? He's, what? Sixteen, turning seventeen this year? These cultivators came all the way here to help you, and you scold them? This hardly seems like respectful behaviour."

Madam Mo's mouth flapped open, but she was probably struck dumb with rage. That was fine, because Wei Ying detected another sliver of cold energy and ducked out of the way, pulling up his sleeve quickly.

Another two cuts healed.

A scream, and Wei Ying jerked to the side, taking stock of the running crowd. The old man was dead, his throat ripped out, and the servant who had been close to young master Mo was snarling, the whites of his eyes showing and his tongue lolling out of his mouth.

That just left him the deepest cut, and Wei Ying deduced that it was probably Madam Mo, seeing how she treated him just now.

But he was digressing. The young servant leapt at Sizhui, who ducked and slapped a talisman onto his forehead. Wei Ying winced at the way its left arm twisted, the bones snapping and groaning.

The corpse—because that was what it was now, without the resentful energy clinging to it—swayed on its feet before toppling over. Simultaneously, the lanterns in the courtyard extinguished itself, plunging the place into darkness.

Only the moon remained, a silent witness to the deaths tonight.

"Ghost...there's a ghost..." Madam Mo whimpered, her eyes wide and glossy. She was probably going into shock, the poor woman. Wei Ying shook his head sympathetically and shrunk into the shadows, watching as the boys inspected the servant's corpse.

Something was not right. This ghost was too powerful to have been drawn in by the Spirit Lure flags, weak as they were. Wei Ying glanced over at the servant, noting the flapping sleeve. So his arm was gone too.

Out of habit, Wei Ying checked the cuts on his arm, and he had to do a double take.

All of them were gone. Only silvery scars remained, shining in the moonlight. But Madam Mo—!

A low snarl snapped at his instincts, and he ducked out of the way quickly. Madam Mo groaned, her skin turned a sickly colour and her arm radiating resentful energy. From the shouts of the two cultivators, Wei Ying knew they had seen it too.

But this wasn't some nobody spirit; this one was dangerous. They seemed to notice it too, Sizhui leaning in to whisper to Jingyi before the latter nodded, digging a smooth tube out of his robes and lighting it, setting off a distress flare.

Wei Ying groaned at the sight of the cloud symbol. Surely his luck wasn't *that* bad, right? He watched the fight closely, ready to intervene at the smallest sign of danger. Sizhui was slightly slower at deflecting—fatigue, perhaps—one of Madam Mo's blows, and Wei Ying darted over to Jingyi, kicking the boy towards Sizhui. If he remembered correctly—

A howl confirmed his suspicions as Madam Mo jerked her hand back, blue flames engulfing her hand up to her wrist.

“Hey! What did you kick me for, huh?” Jingyi shouted.

Wei Ying put on his best innocent face and shook his head frantically. “It wasn't me!”

Sizhui seemed to have had a brainwave, and he whipped off his outer robe, throwing it towards Madam Mo.

“Jingyi, the array!”

“I got you!”

Wei Ying paid no attention to the array that they were setting up. Impressive as it was, it was like a small wooden fence in the path of a charging bull. He walked over to the two corpses lying on the floor, crouching down while keeping a careful eye on Sizhui and Jingyi, who had engaged Madam Mo in a fight.

“Wake up.” Wei Ying laced his voice with resentful energy, and jerkily, the corpses climbed to their feet, lunging towards Madam Mo with extreme prejudice. The order Wei Ying had given them was simple: Eliminate the spirits. Leave the living untouched.

Sizhui and Jingyi stumbled back, watching as the zombies duked it out.

“The fight of the feral zombies?” Sizhui muttered. “I've never seen such a thing before.” He glanced towards Wei Ying, who put on his best fearful expression and ducked behind a pillar.

But inevitably, Madam Mo emerged victorious, and Wei Ying bit back a few choice words. He could raise them again, but with each time he raised the corpses, his identity would be closer to being revealed. No, that would be a last resort.

Silently, Wei Ying lamented the fact that he didn't have any kind of instrument right now; he could whistle or sing, but that would immediately give him away. He heard Madam Mo

approach, her shambling footsteps loud in the empty courtyard and groaned.

No time to debate, he had to save these two first! Quickly, he pulled the resentful energy towards himself, preparing to cast-

A powerful note ripped through the air, and Madam Mo's corpse was slammed into the ground so hard it broke the pavement. Silence hung in the air like a snuffed out lantern, expectant and dark.

More notes broke through it, delicately plucked from what Wei Ying recognised as a guqin. *His* guqin. Quickly, he snuffed out the resentful energy and glanced up.

There, looking like a painting of a god, stood Lan Zhan, regal as ever. He was holding his guqin and balancing on his sword, and he looked as implacable as ever.

"Hanguang-jun!" The juniors exclaimed, relief clear in their voices and Wei Ying cringed away.

He had to get out of here now, or else he would be discovered. Lan Zhan was smart, he'd figure out how the zombies fighting for them matched Wei Ying's skillset.

He was just helping Lan Zhan, Wei Ying reasoned as he tugged a mule that he had found in the stables along the road. It was going to be worse if Lan Zhan found him. He had caused so much trouble for Lan Zhan, after all.

And... it wasn't like he *wanted* to live, anyway. As far as he was concerned, his job here was done. He could go off somewhere quiet and... well, it would be better for everyone if they didn't know that the Yiling Patriarch was alive.

"Come on, you stubborn donkey!" Wei Ying cried, and finally, the reluctant animal broke into a steady trot, though it did give him several dirty looks as he guided them into the mountains.

"Anything?" Xie Lian prompted.

Hua Cheng shook his head, irritation flashing across his face. "I've asked around. There isn't a new Ghost King anywhere. What about you, gege? Have you found anything?"

Xie Lian sighed. "No. Heaven was very interested to know why I was asking about another Ghost King, though. They think that I'm... well, nevermind. So Wei Ying is alive?"

"It would seem so." Hua Cheng leaned back. "Wei Ying is alive, but Mount Tonglu doesn't seem to have settled down. Maybe we should find him and ask him how on earth did he manage to cheat death."

"San Lang, I think you know why we can't find Wei Ying and bring him back." Xie Lian sat down, reaching out to intertwine their fingers together.

"But gege-"

“San Lang. This is Wei Ying’s second chance. Fate or otherwise, we can’t take this away from him. Just imagine if you had a second chance at life.”

“This one would spend a hundred lifetimes looking for you, gege.”

“I know you will. But for Wei Ying...it’s difficult to say. We don’t know what happened to him, but we can just watch for now, okay?”

“This one will do whatever gege says.”

Xie Lian laughed gently, and Hua Cheng couldn’t resist leaning in to press a kiss to Xie Lian’s forehead, his heart singing at the way Xie Lian melted into his touch.

Watching was alright. Hua Cheng would be ready to step in at any moment, and he knew Xie Lian would do the same in a heartbeat.

Chapter End Notes

- info dump below again -

Wei Ying has been through so much, and I sincerely believe that he was happier dead. His mental health was in shambles by the end of his reign as the Yiling Patriarch, and being pulled back to life? I'm pretty sure that he's holding himself together by sheer force of will at this point. He's been transformed into the pariah of society by the very people that he helped, and then he was killed by Jiang Cheng. Honestly? Wei Ying has a mental strength that we can only dream of.

But anyway, I decided to go with the donghua's version of events, partly because it was easier to write, and partly because I didn't want to rewind footage of the web series to watch too. I'm currently rewatching the donghua slowly, so that I can properly write and capture the feeling of the moment. I'll be removing the huge flashback scene, and instead, I'm going to be reworking it so that the flashbacks are captured as memories in Wei Ying's perspective. It'll either be idle thoughts, dreams, or reminiscing of the past, so rejoice, folks! I won't have to watch about 10 episodes of the donghua. Huzzah!

Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

phew! Warnings for this one: Wei Ying almost tips into a panic attack several times, but he's managed to stop himself each time. I have to admit, this was really difficult to transcribe, and I followed the donghua, more or less. If you see parts of it missing, not to worry, I have an explanation.

Wei Ying was just presented with a boatload of information, and I believe he's still in shock from resurrection to seeing so many familiar faces in one night. Brain fog is inevitable, so he might miss a couple of things. Please believe me this is... hm. This isn't sustainable, but do I care? No, not really.

Enjoy the chapter, there aren't any ramblings today because I am too tired to say anything ^^

“Good grief, you run quite fast, don’t you? I can’t keep calling you little donkey, can I? Let’s see... you like apples, so I’ll call you Little Apple! How’s that- woah, easy there!” Wei Ying grappled Little Apple, the obstinate donkey straining against the reins.

He looked at the apple hanging from the rod he’d hastily constructed, tempting the donkey forward. Carrot and a stick indeed. But he wouldn’t harm Little Apple, if it came down to it.

“Little Apple, how would you like to retire, hm? Just me, you, a small cottage, and all the apples the two of us could ever eat!”

Little Apple brayed his agreement, and Wei Ying laughed. Oh, he could almost imagine the look on Hua Cheng’s face when he next visits Puqi Shrine and sees a donkey running around.

“Hua *qianbei* is going to love you, I can feel it already.” Wei Ying assured, patting Little Apple’s flank and urging him forward-

There was a quiet hum, and Wei Ying jumped, scrambling off Little Apple’s back and hiding behind a tree. The array activated, and glittering golden fibres formed in thin air, wrapping around Little Apple and hoisting it up into the air.

Wei Ying composed himself, peeking warily around the tree in case there were any more sneak attacks. When no cultivators leapt out and immediately accused him of murdering young virgins and bathing in blood, he breathed a sigh of relief and stood straight, walking over and picking up the apple that he had found in the stable—a little bruised and and bumped, but still edible.

“Sorry Little Apple! I can’t cut you out even if I wanted to, so get comfortable!” Wei Ying bit down on the apple, savouring the sweetness and pointedly ignoring the enraged howls from Little Apple. He wasn’t lying! Those nets needed a sword to cut through, and well... he didn’t have one on him, among other reasons.

“I wonder who’s rich enough to hunt in this place with these nets?” Wei Ying wondered. A snap jerked him to his senses, and Wei Ying ducked behind a tree again, peeking out. A boy dressed in the colours of the Lanling Sect landed on a tree branch.

“What? A donkey? You have to be joking! Over four hundred nets, and not a single ghost!”

Wei Ying almost choked on his apple. Four *hundred* ?? He knew the Lanling Sect was loaded, but heavens! Wasn’t that a little too much? He sighed quietly, but the boy seemed to pick it up, immediately pulling his bow from his back and stringing an arrow onto it.

“Who’s there?”

Wei Ying tossed his apple out, and an arrow immediately pierced through it. This kid wasn’t a bad shot, after all!

“Ahh, don’t kill me, don’t kill me! First you capture my donkey, and now you try to turn me into a pincushion?” Wei Ying wailed, slipping easily into the role of the terrified madman.

The boy rolled his eyes, before recognition sparked in them, followed closely by disgust.

“Oh. It’s you. Did you hit your head after you got home or something? Can you no longer recognise our coat of arms, you lunatic?”

Coat of arms? Was Mo Xuanyu originally from Lanling Sect? But how did he get in? Unless...

Wei Ying groaned. Was this some kind of divine retribution? Jin Guangshan was most likely bested only by Jiang Cheng in terms of credit for the Burial Mounds siege, and now Wei Ying was reborn in the body of one of his bastard sons. Ah, the heavens were cruel indeed!

“What are you looking at me for, you crazy?” The boy turned to walk away, but Wei Ying was faster.

“Hey, wait a minute! You have to release my donkey, you can’t just leave my poor Little Apple up there!”

“Don’t touch me! It’s bad enough that I have to see you here, if you touch me, I’ll-!”

“How can you speak to your elders like that? Goodness, didn’t your mother teach you any manners?”

The boy’s expression cooled, and his grip tightened on the hilt of his sword. Wei Ying had barely a nanosecond to react before his body did it for him, ducking out of reach of the sword.

That sword... it was familiar. But where had he seen it?

He patted down his body for talismans or some paper, but came up empty. Desperate times called for desperate measures, so he plucked a leaf off a tree and imbued it with resentful energy, shaking the frost off and slapping it onto the boy's back.

Weighed down by young master Mo's spirit, the boy struggled to get up, resorting to shouting at Wei Ying to let him go instead.

"I'll be borrowing your sword for a moment, okay?" Wei Ying hurled the sword towards the net, watching it free Little Apple and come back, burying itself into the ground.

"Let me go, or I'll tell my uncle about you! Colluding with the dark arts! Do you want to emulate the Yiling Patriarch?"

"Who's your uncle? Why not your dad?" Wei Ying wondered.

"I am his uncle."

Something in Wei Ying snapped, and he could barely turn his head to meet *him*. It seemed like his spirit remembered the one who had led the siege against him, and he wanted to- to run? Hide? To attack Jiang Cheng? He was very conflicted by the maelstrom of emotions.

"Any last words?"

Wei Ying could barely focus, but he forced himself to remember. He wasn't back at Burial Mounds. He wasn't at Nightless City. He was *here*, and he was Wei Wuxian. Not the Yiling Patriarch. Deep breaths, and slowly, his vision stopped blurring.

Wei Ying took a better look at Jiang Cheng. Being a clan leader suited him. He looked older, stricter. Then Jiang Cheng glared at him and Wei Ying gulped, trying to move his legs, but they wouldn't listen to him.

"Jin Ling. I didn't come on this nighthunt to watch you humiliate yourself. Get up."

Wei Ying put his arm behind his back, drawing the leaf on Jin Ling's back towards him, but before it reached his hands, a snap of purple snatched it from him.

Jiang Cheng's scowl deepened when he saw the talisman, and with a quick crackle, he burned it. Jin Ling scrambled to his feet, facing Wei Ying.

"You psycho! I'll break your legs!"

"Break his legs? Didn't I teach you how to deal with those who practise demonic cultivation? You kill them and feed them to the dogs."

Wei Ying flinched, the last word bringing back faint memories of snarling teeth and slavering jaws that he tried to push away. But something else stood out to him. The name. Jin Ling. It was so familiar...

Jin Ling whipped his sword out, running straight towards Wei Ying, and too late, he realised he couldn't dodge.

A small part of him sang joyfully at this easy death. Just between the fourth and fifth ribs, and he would be gone.

But something shot between Jin Ling and Wei Ying, forcing the latter to dodge. It slammed into the earth before spinning back up. The smell of sandalwood made Wei Ying blink, waving away the dust that had been kicked up.

Lan Zhan was standing there, slightly behind him. His gaze pinned Wei Ying to the floor, but it was a different kind of pressure from Jiang Cheng. Lan Zhan seemed...curious, somehow.

"Hanguang-jun. You really 'go wherever the chaos is', don't you? Even in such a remote area, you never cease to amaze."

"Master Jin, nighthunts have always been fair game; scattering nets all throughout the mountain takes away game from other cultivators and violates the essence of nighthunting."

Jin Ling huffed. "They were the ones who got caught in my nets. It's not my fault they can't see where they're going."

"Sect leader! Sect- ah. Ahem, sect leader!" A member of the Jiang clan ran up, saw Lan Zhan and hastily changed directions, bowing towards Jiang Cheng.

"What now?"

"Well... there-"

"Spit it out."

"Sect leader, moments ago, a flying blue sword destroyed the nets you set for young master."

"How many?"

"A-all, sect leader."

Jiang Cheng turned to Lan Zhan, and if looks could maim, Lan Zhan would be pinned in place by a thousand swords already. The atmosphere turned tense, and Jin Ling made to unsheathe his sword.

But just as quickly as the tension mounted, it diffused, and Jiang Cheng berated Jin Ling for taking out his sword. After this, Wei Ying tuned out the conversation, retreating to his mind to parse out all the information he'd gotten.

Jin Ling...he was a son of the Lanling Sect, but he referred to Jiang Cheng as his uncle. There was only one person who fit the bill, and suddenly, Wei Ying remembered the words he'd spoken.

“How can you speak to your elders like that? Goodness, didn’t your mother teach you any manners?”

How could he say that? That was...the smell of blood came back to haunt him, and his shijie’s face floated before him, bloodstained and smiling.

Her lips formed the words that he heard in his nightmares.

A-Xian. It’s not your fault.

A loud crash startled him out of his thoughts, and he turned to the cloud of dust. He left the juniors alone for five minutes-

A stone statue stomps out of the dust, its serene, smiling face at odds with its clawed hands, which did not seem to follow the usual properties of stone. Jin Ling, Sizhui and Jingyi were all struggling to make a dent on it, seeing as it was... well, stone, and they didn’t have any explosive talismans on them.

Hm. That would be a problem.

He called out to one of the Lan disciples. “Why don’t you call that Hanguang-jun of yours over? He can help-”

“Shut up, you damn lunatic! I’ll take this thing down myself.” Jin Ling snarled, but he was interrupted by one of the cultivators tossing a bell at the creature. It expanded, slamming down over the statue and sealing it in place.

“Finally! After so long hunting small fry, we’ve hit the jackpot!” The cultivators cheered, but their celebrations fizzled out when the bell chimed ominously. Nervous murmuring erupted around, and Wei Ying looked around frantically.

There wasn’t a single weapon in sight that he could use. But he spotted a sturdy looking bamboo stalk. A little sickly looking, but beggars can’t be choosers. He snapped it off and pulled Jingyi’s sword out of its scabbard, hacking away at the fibre and frantically whittling it into shape. It was going to be bad enough to wake the dead, but that was supposed to be the whole point.

When he played the first note, his eardrums wanted to curl up and die. It wasn’t Chengqing, but he continued playing, despite Jingyi’s shouts for him to stop playing. At first, the energy he exuded wandered aimlessly, trying to look for something to anchor to.

When it did, Wei Ying frowned. It seemed... hollow, somehow. Like he could almost press through the presence. Chains lashed out from the earth, wrapping around the statue and dragging it to its knees. Its face turned to face the earth, and something flew out, slamming into the stone so hard it toppled over, its four arms waving like an overturned beetle.

“Ghost General!”

“It’s Wen Ning!”

Wen Ning? Wei Ying's fingers stalled on his flute, and he looked up sharply. It was indeed Wen Ning, but he didn't seem to be awake at all. There were chains on his arms and legs as well, and Wei Ying could see where they had shattered.

Wen Ning was alive.

An indescribable emotion settled over him, but before he was given time to deal with it, a hand slammed Jin Ling into a tree. Wei Ying lifted the flute to his lips again, playing more by muscle memory than by his actual mind.

If he was being honest, it felt an awful lot like going into shock. Too much information had just been given to him, and he felt like he was going to either pass out or actually follow the path of insanity that Mo Xuanyu had gone down.

He commanded Wen Ning to slash the arm off and hold it down, then waved for one of the Lan disciples to seal the hand away. Once the arm was sealed away, Wei Ying breathed a sigh of relief.

But even that was short-lived. All eyes turned to the most coveted prize: Wen Ning. Unluckily for them, he was still robbed of his sentience, and he attacked without rhyme or reason. Luckily for them, he seemed to be...holding back, somehow.

Nevertheless, Wei Ying found his fingers moving as though he was treading a well worn path, playing a tune that was eerily familiar to him. Wen Ning seemed to recognise the song as well, shambling towards him.

His mind was still fighting him, but it was no longer an all out battle, merely a slight push and pull.

Wei Ying stepped back, Wen Ning stepped forward. It continued until his back hit something solid and warm, and an iron grip closed on his wrist, wrenching the flute from his lips.

Lan Zhan. Wei Ying thought he saw a flicker of recognition in his eyes, but it was gone as quickly as it came, and Wei Ying played a series of quick notes to urge Wen Ning away. He had no idea what had happened in thirteen years, but he wasn't about to let Wen Ning be captured again.

The moment Wen Ning was gone, Wei Ying allowed himself to sag, dropping the flute and gasping as the uncomfortable chill of resentful energy poured through him. His vision dimmed, and his breaths were laboured, like there were iron bands around his chest.

He dimly heard Lan Zhan strum his guqin, but he didn't realise what had happened until he saw Jiang Cheng practically throttling Zidian's hilt.

"So. You've deigned to crawl back, Wei Wuxian." Jiang Cheng snarled, and Wei Ying's instincts finally got the better of him.

He ran. He didn't know where he wanted to go, but somewhere far, far away, into warm arms and playful teases among ghosts and gods sounded preferably-

Pain burst across his back, and he bit back a scream. The force of Zidian sent him into the dirt, but it was nothing compared to how Madam Yu had hit him. His soul had tugged a little, but it was firmly entrenched in this body.

“Who are you?” Jiang Cheng hissed, his eyes narrowing.

“Uncle! This is Mo Xuanyu. He’s not well in the head, and he...well, he pursues anyone who strikes his fancy, whether it be man or beast.” Jin Ling supplied, and if Wei Ying were in less pain, he would have winced at Mo Xuanyu’s reputation.

Goodness, when they said he wasn’t well, they really meant it, didn’t they? He suspected the Mo family had only made things worse.

He missed most of the conversation, but he certainly didn’t miss the way Jiang Cheng’s face twisted when he spat out two words: demonic cultivation. Jiang disciples approached him, and Wei Ying paled.

Uh oh.

Again, his body moved without conscious thought, rushing to hide behind Lan Zhan. Maybe it was fatigue and a cruel twist of fate, because who would hide behind the one who wanted him dead the most?

“Second Master Lan.” Jiang Cheng’s voice was frigid. “Are you trying to obstruct me?”

“Sect leader Jiang. If this one may be so bold, why are you wasting your time on a lunatic?” Sizhui stepped forward.

“I could ask your Hanguang-jun the same. Why is he protecting some no-name who uses demonic cultivation?”

“His path is dark; his deeds are noble.”

“That’s right!” Jingyi spoke up, and Wei Ying felt his heart warm. “Master Mo saved us several times, Jin Ling included!”

Yikes. He had to put a stop to this right now. Wei Ying let go of the last shreds of his dignity and took a deep breath.

“Sect leader Jiang, it’s not that I chase after everything that looks good. I have standards too, you know. For example, there’s a bull in the Mo village that’s healthy and strong; but you don’t see me going after it. Or you, for that matter.”

Throughout his speech, Jiang Cheng looked more and more likely to have a qi deviation right there and then, and internally, Wei Ying smirked. He was always good at riling Jiang Cheng up. Now for the final nail in his coffin, and he can finally escape from the cultivation world.

“You-” Jiang Cheng spluttered.

“But Hanguang-jun for example. He’s totally my type.” Wei Ying sealed the deal with a coquettish flutter of his lashes and a shy, almost coy posture.

Wei Ying smiled innocently at the thunderous expression on Jiang Cheng’s face.

Ha! Take that, you two. I’ve got no qualms saying such things if it’ll get me away from here-

“Very good. You will come with me.” Lan Zhan turned away.

Huh?

Huh??

Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

So... I was made aware of an actual map of mdzs (thank you for bringing this to my attention, dear reader), where the sects are matched to certain regions. I've decided to use it, but I won't change the locations that I already mentioned i.e Qishan Wen being in the east and being close to Tonglu. It's gonna be a bit rough, but I'm sure I can make it work.

Also, these daily updates have been taking a toll on me, both mentally and physically, so a heads up that I might take one day more for some chapters, if they're content heavy.

Warnings for this chapter: nightmares, and mentions of panic attack. It's stopped before Wei Ying spirals. I'm sorry, but he will not be having a good time for these few chapters.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“You’re kidding! Four thousand rules? It’s expanded?” Wei Ying groaned, looking at the cliff face where the words crowded on stone like ants.

“Expanded? Young master, have you been here before?” Sizhui asked curiously, and Wei Ying stiffened.

“A-ah, what I mean to say is that...well, uhm. Anyway, there’s just a lot of rules! It’s too many, in my opinion.” Wei Ying laughed awkwardly, purposely avoiding Lan Zhan’s gaze. “So if you don’t mind, I’ll leave Cloud Recesses. You won’t hear from me again, honest!”

Lan Zhan turned. “You will stay.”

“No, I won’t! I won’t, I won’t, I won’t! You can’t make me! Little Apple, let’s go-oi! Where are you going? Little Apple, you traitor!” Wei Ying gasped, watching Lan Zhan pull an apple out of his sleeve, tempting Little Apple further into Cloud Recesses.

“Hanguang-jun! I didn’t know you were capable of such trickery! Stop, stop!” But despite the protests that fell from Wei Ying’s lips, he still looked around. It looked the same, after all. Maybe a few trees were taller, but that was it.

Cloud Recesses was really heaven on earth, seeing how little it was affected by outside affairs. One could almost believe that it had never been burned down.

Wei Ying kept silent as he was practically peeled off Little Apple’s back and led to a room, but he did smile wryly when he heard them debating whether they should place a locking

talisman on his door.

Like some simple lock would keep him from exploring the compounds. It was a simple matter to unlock the supposedly ‘unbreakable lock’ by channelling resentful energy into it and teasing the lock open.

Wei Ying snickered, drawing another talisman and slapping it onto the door. This one was just a harmless prank talisman: it would stay silent until someone stepped into the room, in which case it would activate, sealing the room and the person inside. If Wei Ying was lucky, he might catch a little Lan disciple- no, wait, what if they didn’t know how to break the lock?

Wei Ying huffed. “Oh, whatever. An elder will come along to release them if they get caught. It’s just a bit of fun. It’s not like I’ll die; what are they going to do, make me copy scriptures?”

His feet seemed to move of their own accord, pulling him down flights of steps carved into the stone, and when he saw his own reflection in one of Cloud Recesses’ many ponds, he saw his own face.

Wei Wuxian. Not Mo Xuanyu.

“Wei Wuxian! How long are you going to stare at that pond? What’s so interesting about koi fish, anyway?”

Wei Ying turned, smiling at Jiang Cheng—who looked younger, more youthful. This was Jiang Cheng before the war robbed him of his family and Lotus Pier.

“I’m wondering if we can steal the fish and replace them with something else—turtles, maybe?—ow! Jiang Cheng!”

“Don’t say such frivolous things, and I won’t hit you!”

“Jiang Cheng, needless violence is forbidden within Cloud Recesses.”

“You-!”

Laughter rang in his ears, and he smiled.

Wei Ying blinked. When had he fallen asleep? The memories of his night filtered through to him slowly, fractured by the morning light. The war, the happy days, the siege... they were all jumbled up, and Wei Ying patted his face, trying to wake himself up fully. What a nice dream.

“I must be getting old already...Dreaming about my past? And it didn't even make sense...”

He rolled his eyes, flopping onto the bed and sighing loudly. The smell of sandalwood and something decidedly sweet hung in the air, and Wei Ying frowned. That smell was familiar...

He looked closer at the room. It was neat, and if it weren't for Bichen, Wei Ying would have assumed that it was just some guest room. But no, of course not. He was in Lan Zhan's bedroom.

"Okay, time to get up, I suppose." Wei Ying put a foot down, and the floor shifted to the side, throwing off his balance. "What the-"

He broke off into disbelieving laughter. No way. Wei Ying got onto his knees, prying open the compartment and running his hands lovingly over the bottles of Emperor's Smile.

"Lan Zhan, Lan Zhan. You've changed." Wei Ying flopped back onto the bed, laughing himself sick. The idea of the morally upright Hanguang-jun secreting bottles of wine into Cloud Recesses and squirrelling them away...oh, he'd pay good money to see that.

"Ah...you used to scold me for bringing in wine, and now look at you! I found wine under your bed! What a hypocrite." Wei Ying could almost hear Lan Zhan's disapproving huff and the slight twitch of his brow that spoke of exasperation.

"Shameless."

But Lan Zhan was the shameless one now, and Wei Ying took a kind of naked, shameless glee in opening two jars, savouring the smooth liquid. Truly, Emperor's Smile was the best alcohol he'd ever tasted. Maybe he should bring some with him when he visited Ghost City, though he couldn't guarantee all the goods would remain unmolested.

He filled the jars half full with water, snickering at the thought of Lan Zhan breaking out a jar or two when he... well, when he was in the mood, and being rudely surprised by water. Perhaps he would think it a heavenly retribution, to have all his wine turned to water as punishment?

His thirst slaked, Wei Ying was about to mess around a little more when he heard knocks on the door, then Sizhui's polite voice filtered through.

"Young master Mo?"

"Uh, present!"

"It's dinner time. Please come with us so we can escort you to the dining hall."

"Oh. Okay! Uh, hang on, where's that Hanguang-jun of yours?"

"Jin Guangyao has invited Lan Xichen to the Golden Carp Tower; Hanguang-jun is currently seeing him off."

Wei Ying poked his head out. "Jin Guangyao?"

"Don't tell me you don't remember him!" Jingyi complained. "He's the leader of the Jin clan, and your half brother! Geez, Jin Ling really wasn't joking when he said that you lost your memory and went mad."

Wei Ying meekly followed the two disciples as they walked down a bridge, and Jingyi was kind enough to explain today's politics to him.

Nie Mingjue, Jin Guangyao and Lan Xichen were now known as the Venerated Triad after they swore brotherhood during the Sunshot Campaign. Nie Mingjue had died after a fatal qi deviation.

"I heard that during the Sunshot Campaign, the Yiling Patriarch used the Stygian Tiger amulet! The water around Qishan ran red for years after that."

"Jingyi, you're exaggerating again."

"I'm not! Well, fine. Maybe it was one year. Anyway, the zombies killed off the city in cold blood. It must have been terrifying."

Wei Ying looked in the water, at an unfamiliar face. He saw himself, standing amidst blood soaked ruins. Resentful energy wreathed his body, and the expression on his face... Wei Ying wondered how he had managed to look like that. He looked...cruel. Unfeeling.

He blinked, and the reflection was gone. The chill wasn't, and he focused on the conversation happening right now.

"I heard that Wei Wuxian was once skilled in cultivation, before he turned to demonic cultivation. I wonder why?"

Not for the first time. Wei Ying bitterly thought of the Stygian Tiger amulet. That thing was an unholy aberration, and he tread the familiar path of self-loathing. They could have won the war without that accursed thing; of that, he was certain.

But before he could go down this path any longer, loud braying interrupted him, and Wei Ying jerked his head up.

Little Apple was chasing down a rabbit, crying out angrily. Its cries petered out when it came face to face with Lan Zhan, and Wei Ying struggled to contain his laughter when he watched Lan Zhan stare down an animal.

"Hanguang-jun!" The disciples rushed forward, and when Lan Zhan turned around, Wei Ying lost it.

"Little Apple! You've met your match today, haven't you? You can't win against him, it's a violation of heaven's laws!" Wei Ying turned to Lan Zhan, giving him an easy smile. The bunny was chewing on Lan Zhan's robes, and silently, Wei Ying wondered if these rabbits were wild or if someone had kept them secretly.

Lan Zhan didn't return to his bedroom, nor make any move to stop Wei Ying from leaving the dinner table early. Still, Wei Ying was cautious as he undressed for bed, kneeling on his mattress and looking at the moon.

“Give me another good dream, please? Something... something relating to Lotus Pier.” Wei Ying clapped his hands together. “Many thanks!”

He flopped over, wriggling under the covers. It was a rather cold night, and he was tired. Wei Ying closed his eyes, and he dreamed.

He was in Lotus Pier, dressed in his regular robes. But when he walked through the gates, the place was empty. The shops were all shut, and the place was covered in a thick layer of dust.

The lakes were dried, and the lotuses all withered into brown and yellow stalks. The city was silent, and as Wei Ying walked closer to his childhood home, he felt unease weighing on him.

It was too quiet.

Usually, the place would be bustling, with the smell of food and candy in the air. Now, there was only an odd empty smell.

The halls of Yunmeng Jiang were clean, like they had recently been polished. But there was still no water, and no one walked around.

“Jiang Cheng?” Wei Ying called out, his voice suddenly small. “Shijie? Uncle Jiang? Madam Yu? Anyone?”

No one answered him, but the whistling of wind slowly transformed.

“Jiang Cheng! Take it away!”

Wei Ying stiffened at the sound of dogs. Oh no. Oh, not this memory-

“What’s wrong? Are you scared of dogs?”

A child rounded the corner, crashing into Wei Ying’s legs. Out of habit, he scooped the child up, his arms arranging themselves around him. The sound of footsteps followed soon, and a tiny Jiang Cheng surrounded by three dogs came close.

Wei Ying couldn’t stop the whimper that escaped his lips.

Jiang Cheng narrowed his eyes. “Who are you? Why are you in our home?”

Wei Ying took a step back, suddenly in his Patriarch robes again. The child in his arms was A-Yuan, and he was looking at a sea of cultivators, shimmering with spiritual energy. Resentful energy came to him easily, and he cut huge swathes into the cultivators’ ranks, whispering to A-Yuan to cover his eyes-

“Baba?”

No.

A-Yuan was looking at him with fear in his eyes, and when Wei Ying reached out to wipe off a smudge of blood on his cheek, he shrieked and wriggled out of Wei Ying’s arms, running

into Granny Wen's arms instead.

“A-Yuan? It’s me. It’s baba, please, A-Yuan...” Wei Ying pleaded, falling to his knees. “A-Yuan...”

A-Yuan burst into tears. “Baba is gone!” He sobbed. “You made him stop moving!”

The sword that pierced his chest hurt less than those words.

Wei Ying blinked, wiping away the tears that streamed down his face. He turned on his side, his chest heaving with silent tears. The air was cold, and his breaths steamed in front of him. Wasn’t it spring...?

He let out a strangled cry when he felt something burn him, but the heat retreated, something light and warm brushing against him instead. Silver light flickered through his eyes, and he forced his frozen limbs to move, turning to face the light.

“Hua *qianbei* ?”

Chapter End Notes

baba: father

If anyone guesses what happens, you'll be my favourite person. Not a long chapter for this one, but it's one that's setting up the scenery for next chapter. Sorry for it being so late though, I passed out for 3 hours because I was tired.

Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

Why is it that when I create crossover content, it comes easier than if I have to transcribe mdzs episodes? It's wild

Warnings: there are mentions of wanting to commit suicide, though it is just vaguely mentioned. It's more like... self destructive behaviour on Wei Ying's part.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“Hua *qianbei* ?”

Hua Cheng inhaled sharply. He was impervious to extreme temperatures, but even he knew that the cold in the room was unnatural. He spread out his butterflies to light the room up, getting onto the bed and inspecting Wei Ying.

His entire body was curled in a fetal position, and he was shivering. Hua Cheng sent some of his butterflies to Wei Ying, warming him slowly.

“I’m here, Wei Ying.”

Wei Ying’s lips curved into a ghost of a smile, and he closed his eyes. Hua Cheng warmed the room, filling it with his own spiritual energy and dispelling the resentful energy. He didn’t know Wei Ying would be experiencing this so soon, but with an explanation, surely Wei Ying could suppress the excess resentful energy.

His body was not meant to be a vessel for something more. And there was the fact that his ashes were still in the mortal realm...

Hua Cheng sighed, leaning back as he felt warmth return to the room. “Wei Ying, why is it that everything involving you is so needlessly complicated?”

Wei Ying did not answer, but he was still cold to the touch. Residual effects of the resentful energy, but Hua Cheng would deal with that too. It was easy enough to shift into his boyish form, dressed in the white robes of the Gusu Clan. Getting to the kitchen, however. Now that was the difficult part.

There was no one outside, but he got the feeling that there was a curfew in place, which seemed...excessive. Perhaps it was a code of conduct thing. Still, Hua Cheng kept away from the windows, stepping into the kitchen.

The second problem he discovered was that all of their ingredients were bland and borderline medicinal. There was also no meat in the kitchen, only some mild sweeteners that Hua Cheng used in the tea that he was making.

Along the way, he wondered how he should break the news to Xie Lian. They had both been worried about Wei Ying, and both had shown their concern in various ways. Xie Lian threw himself into work, while Hua Cheng would pace a new canyon into the halls of Paradise Manor.

Tonight was one night that he had interfered, and the last time that Xie Lian would probably allow him to visit Wei Ying alone. Hua Cheng hated not telling Xie Lian things, but he couldn't reach him through the communication array, for some reason.

"No. Please...don't go."

Hua Cheng stiffened, his hand resting on the door. That voice sounded like a cruel parody of Wei Ying's cheerful and energetic yells. It mocked Hua Cheng.

"Wen Ning! Wen Qing, stop, don't go! They'll kill you! Let me go! Wen Qing! I'll go instead!"

Hua Cheng felt like he had been dropped into Black Water's lagoon, and he was sinking like a stone. Who were these people? Wei Ying seemed like he was in pain, watching them leave. Did they hurt him?

Hua Cheng tapped softly on the door, balancing the tray against his hip. "Wei Ying?"

There was silence, then that cheerful voice was back.

"Hua *qianbei*? Have you come to visit this sickly disciple? Come in, come in!"

When Hua Cheng stepped in, he almost wondered if his ears were failing him. Wei Ying looked as healthy as ever, and the bright smile on his face was unnervingly genuine. Was he pretending? How many of his smiles were fake?

"Wei Ying. I brought you some hot tea, to warm you up."

"Thank you, Hua *qianbei* - or should I call you by a different name, since you're pretending to be a Gusu Lan disciple?" Wei Ying sat up slowly, sipping his tea with a mischievous glint in his eye.

"If you have enough breath to tease me, perhaps I should drink the rest of your tea." Hua Cheng sighed, letting his disguise melt away. "Though, I do wonder how you managed to live here for even a week. There was no one outside when I went to get tea."

"-curfew. We have to be in bed by nine and rise by five."

"Really?"

"Mhm. They have over four thousand rules now, carved on the wall outside Cloud Recesses."

“That sounds like torture. I hope they paid the person who carved it handsomely.” Hua Cheng observed Wei Ying while they talked about everything and nothing. Colour was coming back into his cheeks now, and he looked better. Healthier.

“Oh, before I forget. There’s a false panel underneath this bed with some of Gusu’s signature alcohol. Hua *qianbei* , why don’t you bring it back-”

“Wei Ying.” Hua Cheng took a deep breath. “You cannot use resentful energy anymore. It is destructive-”

“Huh? No, I swear it’s fine! I just get a little cold now and then-”

“-you don’t understand. Using resentful energy now will kill you, Wei Ying. Not all at once, but you saw what happened when you lost control over your emotions.”

Wei Ying bowed his head, looking into his tea, and Hua Cheng almost thought he had fallen asleep when he spoke.

“That’s kind of the point, Hua *qianbei* .”

“What do you mean?”

His voice was steady, and when Wei Ying looked up, he had a crooked little smile on his face.

“I don’t want to live anymore. I died with no regrets, and I didn’t even come back as a vicious ghost or anything, I just... What’s the point of me living again? My family’s dead, and those who aren’t dead hate me.”

“That is not true.” Hua Cheng hissed vehemently. “You were given a second chance at life, so you have to cherish it.”

“What about you? What if you were given a second chance at life?” Wei Ying challenged. “What good is a second chance if they don’t listen-”

“So make them listen!” Hua Cheng snapped, his patience thinning. “Make them understand that you weren’t responsible for all of their wrongdoings! Wei Ying, you’ve spent years in the Kiln to suppress the energy, you of all people deserve a second chance to right your wrongs.”

“I-”

“Rain hell on them. Make sure people know what they really are.” Hua Cheng thought of the thirty three heavenly officials that he wiped out. They deserved it, and these people did too. Everyone who wronged Wei Ying.

“Hua *qianbei* .” Wei Ying’s eyes were shiny in the silver light of his butterflies. “Thank you.”

“You silly brat. You’re over thirty already, and you still act like a bullied child?” Hua Cheng huffed.

“No, I’m only three years old at most!” Wei Ying grinned. “And you’re over eight hundred already, Hua *qianbei* .”

Hua Cheng snorted inelegantly. “So you admit that you’re just a little brat? Gege’s also about eight hundred years old, but I don’t see you blackening his name behind his back.”

“That’s because Xie *da-ge* treats me nicer!”

“Here, you insolent child.” Hua Cheng pulled out one of his dice, pressing it into Wei Ying’s hands. The gesture was eerily familiar to the both of them, and he could see in the tension of Wei Ying’s shoulders that he recognised this die.

“If you ever need to come to Ghost City, use this die. But it’s a one time thing, so keep it carefully. Only you can activate it.”

“Are you going to leave now?” Wei Ying pocketed the die.

Hua Cheng pursed his lips. “Yes. But I’ll be ready to step in, if you need any help. Do you know what a communication array is?”

“It’s a way for you to communicate...? Is that why you and Xie *da-ge* were always glancing at each other?” Wei Ying accused Hua Cheng. “You left me out of the conversation!”

“We were talking about grown up stuff, A-Ying. But now, I think I can teach the spell to you. Gods and ghosts use this to communicate over long distances-”

“Wait, doesn’t that... I’m not a ghost, or a god.” Wei Ying spluttered.

Hua Cheng sighed. He could almost hear Wei Ying's thoughts, and he wondered if he should bring some of his projects from Ghost City for him to tinker with. In another life, perhaps he would have been a brilliant inventor.

“Wei Ying, you were once a ghost, remember? I’m pretty sure that qualifies you to learn the spell. Besides, it’s not like there is an actual rule to give out these spells. It’s just easier for us to communicate.”

Wei Ying nodded, determined to learn this new spell, however complicated it was.

Turns out, it was insanely simple. The spell only required one’s spiritual energy and a password, which Hua Cheng helped Wei Ying set up. He chose Emperor’s Smile as his password, much to Hua Cheng’s endless amusement.

It took a few tries of the array for him to get used to the voice that echoed inside his head, but when he did, he found it endlessly amusing to chat to Hua Cheng, all while his lips remained still. All he had to do was to think of what he wanted to say.

But spiritual energy is spiritual energy, and he didn’t exactly have a very large golden core—that is to say, Mo Xuanyu’s body didn’t have a very developed cultivation.

“That is a problem.” Hua Cheng observed.

“Well, it’s not like I have to talk to you so frequently, and using this with others will only throw me under more suspicion.” Wei Ying looked like he was thinking, and Hua Cheng knew that despite his easy words, he was going to figure out a way to circumvent this situation.

“You brat. You won’t even call to check in on your poor Hua *qianbei* and Gege once in a while?” Hua Cheng sighed, shaking his head ruefully. “How did I pick up such an unruly child?”

Wei Ying rolled his eyes. “Hua *qianbei* , I think you should get going soon. I promise I’ll take care of myself.”

Hua Cheng’s eyes narrowed. “No resentful energy.”

“I promise, on my heart, that I won’t use an excessive amount of energy.” Wei Ying placed his hand over his chest solemnly, but the glee on his face juxtaposed that.

Hua Cheng huffed, fondness rising in his chest. “See that you do, otherwise this Ghost King will come for you and drag you down to Ghost City.”

"This humble disciple will await your punishment."

Chapter End Notes

- info dump again -

Hey! So, the communication array is actually considered a spell that requires spiritual energy to power, which I found needlessly amusing. Teaching Wei Ying how to use this spell is the equivalent of tossing alcohol onto a fire. He's literally going to hack his way into the official Heavenly array and I am all here for it. Since they mentioned that cultivators did use spiritual energy, I decided to make it so that the communication array is just a secret shared among gods and ghosts, since they don't actually seem to use them with humans because most humans are non-cultivators, so it was pretty much useless.

Still, Wei Ying has a weak golden core at the moment, so think of it as him being on a limited data plan for a phone.

Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

oh my god, it's officially the 30k mark for this fic! It's monstrous, and we're barely at the crux of it yet. I really do wonder how big this fic will be... thank you all for sticking with me for 28k words already :D

Thank you for all the comments you have left too!

No ramblings today, I'm currently coming to terms with the fact that I will once again have to rely on writing these chapters to keep me awake in class

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

If anyone asked, Wei Ying was just wandering. Wandering, looking at the trees and the flowers, or whatever it was people did in their free time. He was definitely not plotting an escape.

Well...maybe nostalgia played a part too. He really was getting old now, wasn't he?

He was going to the springs. It had been a while since he had visited that place, and he had made it his personal mission to visit every single location that had had some impact on him. Call him sentimental, but he wanted to see how they had fared over thirteen years.

So far, the study, the cliff where they had released lanterns and the rooftops that he had fought Lan Zhan on were the same. The springs however...maybe they had changed.

Ah, but who knew that Lan Zhan would be there, soaking in the cold water?

Wei Ying scrambled behind a bush, praying to all the gods above that Lan Zhan hadn't heard him, but when he didn't hear anything moving, he risked a peek.

Lan Zhan had his back facing him, and he seemed to be relaxed. His robes were folded neatly by the water, but what drew Wei Ying's eyes were the scars on Lan Zhan's back. Long, ugly slashes, some short, some long, crisscrossing his back.

Goodness, what had transpired in thirteen years for Lan Zhan to be punished so severely? The only people who held that authority were his brother, Lan Xichen and that old man Lan Qiren. So what had Lan Zhan done to force his brother's hand?

He shook his head and refocused on the robes, plucking a leaf from the bush and whispering to it quietly. Hua Cheng had said no resentful energy...but it was just a little! Wei Ying drew on it quickly, rubbing his hands to push warmth back into them while the leaf turned into a small figure.

“Go,” he whispered. “Get the jade pass.”

If he played his cards well, he could be out of here within the day, and off to Ghost City. He watched raptly as his leaf figure floated towards the folded robes, wriggling the thick jade pass out of Lan Zhan’s robes.

It was going well until Lan Zhan stood up, his hand trailing in the water before he practically hurled the water in his palms at the leaf figure, sending it to the ground and dashing Wei Ying’s hopes.

Oops. Time for damage control.

“Oh, uh, Lan Zhan! I was just...passing by, when I saw this jade pass. Funny, isn’t it? I came to give it back to you!” Wei Ying backtracked when Lan Zhan walked towards him, pocketing the jade pass.

“Wait- wait a minute, Hanguang-jun! I wasn’t watching you bathe, I really wasn’t!” Wei Ying’s eyes slid down to Lan Zhan’s chest, and his own chest throbbed in phantom pain when he realised what was the mark.

It was the brand that Wei Ying had gotten, in almost the same spot. But why had Lan Zhan...?

“Hanguang-jun! Bad news, the demonic arm is out of control! The elders can’t suppress it any longer!”

Distantly, Wei Ying could hear the mournful tolls of a bell, and he felt the telltale chill of resentful energy again. So soon? Lan Zhan brushed past him immediately, forging into the cold, and Wei Ying was left with the two disciples.

Dimly, Wei Ying remembered that the bell would continue ringing as long as there was resentful energy in there, and it hadn’t stopped ringing for half a shichen. There was a slight lull in the cold, and he could hear Lan Zhan’s playing slicing through the tolls.

But it wasn’t enough.

So with a silent apology to Hua Cheng, Wei Ying stepped forward, marching resolutely towards the door.

“Open up!” Wei Ying commanded.

“Young master Mo, you can’t-!”

“Do you think the door will just open for anyone?”

The doors flung themselves open, and Wei Ying took a certain measure of pride in the gasps that came from Jingyi and Sizhui.

The scene inside was a mess. Lan Zhan was seated opposite Wei Ying, his fingers flying over the strings. The arm writhed inside the confines, and the air alternated between cold and

warm.

He sat down cross legged, took a deep breath, and began.

He felt the changes immediately. Before, the resentful energy behaved like a surly child; you simply had to bribe it with sweet and honeyed words. Now, it felt like a raging river, crashing onto Wei Ying with the force of a waterfall. He almost buckled underneath the weight, but he held up, helping Lan Zhan cover his blind spots and patch the music up; not that there was anything different, but it used less resentful energy this way.

Blue fire licked at the edge of the containment, and crimson arms stretched out, grappling with the thrashing demonic hand. Slowly, cun by cun, they wrestled the arm down, and Lan Zhan placed a seal over it that wouldn't be easy to get out of.

Slowly, warm returned to the room, though Wei Ying's hands still shook a little.

"You couldn't summon his soul?"

"Mn. Soul and body were cut up."

"Interesting..."

The doors slammed open, and Lan Zhan instructed Jingyi and Sizhui to tend to the elders.

"You- you're alive?"

Wei Ying stood up, dusting off his robes and calming the tremor in his hands. "Well, don't sound so surprised. I can hold my own in a fight, you know."

"Jingyi didn't mean anything by that, young master Mo. It's just that... Well, I think it's not that simple." Sizhui chewed on his lip pensively.

"Do elaborate."

"I think this arm is targeted at the Lan clan specifically."

"Oh? What brought on this train of thought?"

Sizhui started to list out the anomalies; all things that Wei Ying already deduced, of course, but it was still nice to know that someone has a keen eye too.

"The spirit flags we brought could only draw weak spirits to us, but that arm was vicious and killed three people in one night."

"I bet my flags would be able to drag Hua *qianbei* from his work." Wei Ying muttered under his breath.

Jingyi frowned. "Stop muttering and mumbling to yourself, it's creepy!"

“Fine, fine. Sizhui, continue.” Wei Ying waved away Jingyi’s words, snickering at the indignant splutter.

“If that arm was truly what we were here to exorcise, there would be many more casualties. Hence, the arm was placed there after our arrival. That means...” Sizhui swallowed before continuing. “That means that the lives lost there were our responsibility.”

“Aiya, you Lans are always so upright. The one responsible for this should be the one who tossed the arm into the village. You two were clearly unprepared for such a situation, but I daresay you did your best.”

Lan Zhan approached him. “Anything?”

Wei Ying tapped his flute against the wrist of the arm, watching it twitch. “Soul Rend. It can split a soul into pieces, along with its body. You have to be highly skilled to use this spell though, so the person who did this... they knew what they were doing.”

A tiny portion of his brain was whirring with the possibilities. If he could find Mo Xuanyu’s soul, he could... no, that was too risky.

“Can you remove it?”

Wei Ying sighed melodramatically. “Yes, we can. But it’s going to take time and energy, since it’s a rather complicated spell, with a whole wagon of things that can go wrong.”

Even after death, he really couldn’t rest in peace. First, Mo Xuanyu called him back. On the same night of his resurrection, the arm appeared. Then, Wen Ning...someone was playing the long game here.

But what was their goal?

“Huh? The arm moved!” Jingyi stumbled back, and Wei Ying’s hand went instinctively to his waist. The arm twisted itself upwards, turning for a bit before pausing.

“Hanguang-jun! There are reports of evil spirits stirring!”

“Time.”

“Around midnight, at these remote locations.” The disciple unfurled a map, revealing dark circles marked around specific locations. “All of them not five hundred miles from here.”

“The arm acted up, and now evil spirits...” Wei Ying trailed off, waiting for Lan Zhan to connect the dots. He did not disappoint.

“On my order: send twenty disciples to each location. I will investigate this matter further tomorrow.”

“But there’s more than one place. Where do we start?”

Wei Ying sighed and gestured to the arm. "Come now, isn't it obvious? Where the arm points, we go!"

Turns out, the arm pointed them to a desolate village, in the northeast location. The place was completely empty. Wei Ying couldn't even detect a wisp of resentful energy, and he said as much to Lan Zhan.

They walked further into the village, and Wei Ying took note of the decrepit state of the buildings. Were they abandoned? There did seem to be wear and tear, but there were also attempts to patch up the houses.

Their footsteps rang out, but soon, someone else joined them.

There were three pairs of footsteps now, and Wei Ying could see shadows in the corner of his eye. The figure slipped under the eaves of a house and Wei Ying followed, smiling at the metallic scrape of Bichen being drawn, then the whistle of the blade cutting through the air.

The man whimpered when the blade passed him by inches, but his eyes bugged out when Lan Zhan appeared, giving the man a hard look.

"Why are you following us?"

Under the gaze of Hanguang-jun, the man scrambled to press his forehead to the ground, grovelling for mercy.

"Forgive this lowly one, Hanguang-jun! I just came here to try my luck, after hearing about the activity of evil spirits here!"

"Try your luck? Are you looking for something?" Wei Ying picked up one of the talismans, turning it this way and that. Spotted with ash... the talisman was quite well drawn.

"We...we follow the path of demonic cultivation. Of course we're looking for the weapons that the Yiling Patriarch wielded."

Wei Ying grimaced, turning to Lan Zhan discreetly. The latter didn't have a visible reaction, but Wei Ying saw the tightness in his jaw and gulped.

Undeterred by their silence, the man pressed on eagerly.

"After the Burial Mounds Siege, the Ghost General, the Stygian Tiger Amulet, Chengqing, and all of the Yiling Patriarch's weapons were lost. But the Ghost General appeared on Dafan Mountain recently, and that reignited hope for finding the other lost treasures."

Wei Ying burst into laughter, and the affronted face that the man had on only served to make him laugh harder.

"Oh, oh, you really think the Yiling Patriarch would store his treasures in a deserted area such as this? That's a good joke!"

“You never know. Treasures are never easily found. I asked around, and there really is something strange happening here. Eleven years ago, a few people from the nearby villages went missing. There were strange noises in the woods... It was the talk of the town, so I heard. Many of the villagers moved away, but then... it all just went back to normal after a while.”

The man took a deep breath, as though fortifying himself. “But then, two days ago, the sounds started up again.”

At that moment, a voice floated to them on the breeze. Thin, wispy and almost insubstantial, it sounded like a woman, whispering something in a singsong voice. The voice got slightly louder when they approached a laundry rack, and Lan Zhan drew his sword wordlessly, slicing through the cloth.

A woman sat there, a small smile on her face. Her eyes were unfocused and far away, and she sang the song dreamily, as though she wasn’t aware of it. But when she saw Lan Zhan, her eyes snapped into focus, and she screamed.

She didn’t stop screaming, simply scrambling to her feet and running away into the darkness. Wei Ying heard another pair of footsteps, different from the man who had run away.

“Poor thing... She’s had a tough life.”

Wei Ying and Lan Zhan bowed to him, but it was Wei Ying who spoke first. “What do you mean?”

“Eleven years ago, she was the only one who made it back. What a pity it was that she went mad soon after.” The man knelt down, placing down a fresh *mantou* in front of the woman and stepping away.

“No one knew what had happened to her.” The man sighed, banging his small gong and leaving, taking the lantern light with him. “The sun is rising! Evil spirits, begone.”

Wei Ying scrutinised the woman, who was currently tearing apart the *mantou* ravenously.

“This woman must have seen something up there that made her like this...” he murmured.

“Mn. Go and see.”

“Alright, alright, Hanguang-jun. Don’t rush, we have to take this slow.”

Chapter End Notes

mantou is a type of bread, usually steamed. It’s really good, and I thoroughly understand why they can just eat *mantou* like that

Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

Whew, we head into the man-eating castle arc! Still not a lot of interference from he and xl, but I noticed something while transcribing the episodes. Did you know that wwx barely uses resentful energy? He usually relies on lan zhan, or he uses it in short bursts. It's nothing like what he did during the sunshot campaign, but goodness he still uses it a bunch. Still, it gives me a really good chance to insert the effects of using resentful energy in without it seeming too out of place.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The mountain was completely blanketed in fog, but it felt...different. Dry, and there were no droplets clinging heavily to Wei Ying's robes. Instead, it just drifted along like clouds of dust, swirling around them as they walked deeper into the forests.

"They say evil spirits have been unusually active in this area, but this place..."

"Quiet." Lan Zhan agreed.

"I have a bad feeling about this." Wei Ying muttered. The place was dead silent, and as Wei Ying walked deeper into the forest, he counted his steps.

One, two, three...

A shiver of resentful energy passed across his body. It was barely there, but Wei Ying felt it all the same. Lan Zhan did too, from the way he looked around.

Wei Ying looked around, tracking the patterns of the resentful energy. It was here now, ebbing and flowing like the tides. But there was still a relatively sparse amount. Wei Ying glanced towards a disturbance in the flickering shadows, narrowing his eyes and trying to see through the fog.

Something was there.

A voice sliced through the forest. "You-! What are you doing!?"

Wei Ying could faintly recognise that voice, but it wasn't until a sword came flying towards them that Wei Ying realised what was going on .

Jin Ling!

Without another word, Wei Ying sprinted towards the sound of the voice, followed closely by Lan Zhan. They worked like a well oiled machine, and it hurt Wei Ying to think that after all these years, they still knew each other so well. Did Lan Zhan think of him?

Did he mourn Wei Ying? Or was he secretly glad that the Yiling Patriarch was dead?

“Stop! Why are you attacking me?” Wei Ying cringed when Jin Ling tripped over a root, and out of instinct, sent a bolt of resentful energy towards the sword coming down on him, knocking it out of the person’s hand.

He groaned quietly, the chill making its way back into his bones, seeping into his very being. Lan Zhan dealt with the situation quickly, a sharp burst of spiritual energy dispelling the resentful energy clinging to the man.

Wei Ying helped Jin Ling up, and he felt some measure of amusement and exasperation when Jin Ling shook him off, staring at him with a mixture of disgust and curiosity.

“It’s you! What are you doing here?”

“I could ask you the same question.”

Jin Ling crossed his arms. “I’m here to get rid of evil spirits. Have you been cured yet?” He glanced towards Lan Zhan, who was inspecting the man. “Huh, you found yourself a good friend to depend on.”

Lan Zhan bowed to the man. “Clan leader Yao.”

“Ha- Hanguang-jun? I- what? What happened?”

Jin Ling walked towards the man. “You really don’t know? You tried to kill me! I couldn’t even talk any sense into you.”

“How is that possible?”

“It’s not madness. There’s something in the air here, which made him hallucinate.” Wei Ying tapped his flute against his palm, gesturing to the air around them.

“Mo...Mo Xuanyu?”

Ah, right. He wasn’t in his own body.

“You studied the Yiling Patriarch’s sorcery, right? You’re from the Jin clan, after all. You-! You’re ruining your clan’s reputation!”

“Well, well, listen to you go! The Yiling Patriarch? Why would I want to learn from him?” *I know everything there is to know about him, after all* , Wei Ying thought wryly. “Besides, even if I wanted to dabble in demonic cultivation, why would you care?”

“You-!” Clan leader Yao turned to Lan Zhan. “Hanguang-jun, he’s a lunatic. Why are you associating with the likes of him? I guess you really don’t know what he-”

“He is a guest of the Lan clan. I invited him here to help.”

Wait. What?

“Problem?” Lan Zhan levelled a stare at the clan leader, as though daring anyone to question his judgement. Wei Ying had never seen Lan Zhan this assertive before. Perhaps these thirteen years had changed him somewhat.

“More people around here.” Lan Zhan glanced at Clan leader Yao, who nodded. “The air isn’t good.”

And more people they found. There were two more, also driven mad by the air. But they were quickly cleansed, and Lan Zhan estimated about half an hour before they regained consciousness.

“Thank you for your help.”

Jin Ling was holding his nose—as if that would stop the resentful energy in the air—and glaring at the shadows that wriggled in the mist.

“What kind of spirit has such strong wrath to the point of poisoning the air?” Jin Ling turned to Wei Ying, suspicion written all over his face. “Hang on, you said it was the air. So why am I not affected?”

This kid...

“Because you’re exceptionally strong,” Wei Ying snarked, watching his face light up with hope.

“Really?”

“No, of course not. How could you believe me just like that? You have the Jiang Clarity bell with you, right? That helps.” Wei Ying rummaged in the folds of his robe, pulling out a small bottle of medicine. “Come here, I need to apply this to your injury.”

“What- stay away from me, you lunatic!”

“I’m just trying to help! Come back here!”

“Get away from me! Keep your medicine- what the-?!”

“Jin Ling? Jin Ling!” Wei Ying’s body moved before his mind registered the scream, some long embedded instinct driving him. His heart pounded, and resentful energy howled in his ears, practically taunting him to use them.

Bodies.

None of them were fresh, and the blood on the dried leaves had long since become rusty patches, but they were definitely disciples from the Yao clan.

The dry rasp of scales over leaves alerted him, but before Wei Ying could say anything, Jin Ling was gone, unsheathing his sword and shouting something about being able to handle these sort of monsters since he had fought it before. Honestly, that kid...

The snake was huge, easily dwarving the trees around it. Wei Ying was reluctant to use resentful energy at first, Hua Cheng's warnings ringing in his ears. It was the sight of an absolutely *monstrous* reptile and the tiny golden figure that was trapped; that darted around its head that forced his hand.

"Rise!"

The resentful energy howled delightedly, surging to do his bidding. They gnawed at his meridians, but he kept a neutral face on, forcing his body to stand upright and push more resentful energy out. The snake thrashed in its dark bonds, but when Wei Ying brought his hands together, the trap snapped shut.

"Close." The jaws of the resentful energy clicked shut, and Wei Ying pressed his palms together, ignoring the buzzing feeling from his fingertips. He could see his fingers blackening, and the moment Lan Zhan intervened, he let go of his control over the energy.

Lan Zhan's sword strikes were quick and fluid, but still held a measure of strength to them; he cut through the snake like it was nothing, and Wei Ying? Well, the world had suddenly gone grey, and he fought to keep the tea that Hua Cheng had given him down. Deep breaths, deep breaths...

"What the hell was that snake doing there?" Jin Ling demanded. "Did it kill the-"

"Nope. The bite marks don't match." Wei Ying gestured towards the more circular bite marks, then to the fangs on the snake.

"Things are strange around here. It is mutated."

"Mutation? Yeah, on Phoenix Mountain, there was one too..." Wei Ying mused, but he jumped when he saw Lan Zhan looking at him. Right, right, he had to act. "Ah, I mean, I mean! I heard about it, I heard about it...heh."

"Oh, that reminds me! I remember that because of this snake, Jin Zixuan nearly had a huge row with the Yiling Patriarch over it. If Jiang Yanli hadn't stepped in, things would've gotten ugly."

And there it was. Goodness, Wei Ying couldn't swing Suibian without hitting someone who remembered some terrible story about him, could he?

The clan leader continued, unknowing of the dampened mood. "That Jiang Yanli...she treated him as her own brother, and what did she get in return?"

Jin Ling rushed off, and Wei Ying couldn't resist calling after him futilely. This boy was likely sensitive about his situation, and Wei Ying couldn't help but feel a tinge of guilt. All of

this was technically his fault... at least he was accumulating good karma by saving Jin Ling's life, right? Hopefully he could at least enter the reincarnation cycle again.

A piercing scream brought Wei Ying back from his thoughts, and he saw Jin Ling backing away from a vine covered structure. Fog cloaked the area, and Wei Ying could barely see a few feet in front of him, let alone inspect the statue.

But Lan Zhan pulled the cover off his guqin, and without a word, swept out a note that cleared the fog in seconds.

Wei Ying felt a grim sort of satisfaction as he surveyed the scene before him. He guessed right.

"They're corpses. Someone set up a trap array here."

"A trap array?"

"It keeps resentful energy, humans, animals and spirits in, which is why so few people have managed to leave. It's also the reason why everything was so calm at the bottom of the mountain; a spell of this calibre would have boundaries."

"So these bodies..."

"Correct. They are the villagers from eleven years ago." Wei Ying nodded to himself. Jin Ling was smart. He would be able to get far in the cultivating world.

"They... they're just bodies," Jin Ling said, fear shining through his thin facade of bravery. "They won't move."

"Which is precisely why this is so odd. Why did the watchtower receive news of restlessness?"

"Something stronger than the array. It can move inside." Lan Zhan summarised.

Movement by Jin Ling's head caught Wei Ying's eye, and he manipulated the resentful energy around them to push the thing away. Lan Zhan wasted little time in setting up his guqin again, plucking at a few notes that shook the very air-

There.

Wei Ying shot forward, focusing on the clammy feeling of resentful energy that wasn't his. For a split second, when he summoned resentful energy again, he felt like he was too big for this body, but it was all over when he slapped the talisman against the emaciated head.

"Didn't you say they were trapped? How can this head still move around?" Jin Ling's indignant voice rang out, but Wei Ying was too distracted to even snap back with a witty reply.

"Because it's too strong. Like Lan Zh- uh, I mean Hanguang-jun said, it's strong enough to move in the array. Not all arrays are flawless, after all. Still, this one was good." Wei Ying

sighed, looking at Jin Ling's questioning face. "No? How about I put it this way: ordinary people can get stuck, but do you see Hanguang-jun being encumbered here?"

"The culprit is here."

Wei Ying nodded. "Yeah. The teeth marks match; this was what killed those watchtower keepers."

"The hand and the head."

"No. The head doesn't have the Soul Rend on it. I trust our venerable Hanguang-jun knows what to do?"

Lan Zhan nodded, and soon, the notes of Inquiry filled the air. Wei Ying forced his soul to remain still, gripping his wrist until his nails cut into his skin.

A figure slowly formed, and details were brought to light. Ah, so it was a flashback. The robes of the ghost formed, and Jin Ling gasped quietly.

"Uncle Jin Zixun...?"

"Wei Wuxian!" An accusing finger was lifted at him, and his heart did a funny little flip and landed somewhere in his throat. No. It couldn't...

Slowly, he turned around and audibly breathed a sigh of relief when he saw his past self. But that relief was short lived as he took note of the dark tendrils of shadows that cloaked him.

"Your mother was a lowly maid!" Jin Zixun spat. "Who do you think you are-"

His next words were choked off when Wei Wuxian lifted his hand, the energy crawling forward to wrap itself around Jin Zixun's throat.

"You will pay for what you did to Wen Ning." His voice was calm, but it carried the venom of a thousand snakes, and Wei Ying swore his eyes flashed red.

It cut to a different scene, where Jin Zixun was standing in front of a mirror. Wei Ying grimaced, turning away from the pockmarked chest that oozes pus.

"Hundred Holes Curse?"

"Wei Wuxian! Remove this curse at once, or else-"

Wen Ning appeared, slicing through the vision, and by extension, the flashback.

Wei Ying inhaled shakily. The memories were still fresh. He could still hear their cries, and the resentful energy whispering to him through the Stygian Tiger Seal.

"That head is Jin Zixun." Lan Zhan calmly stated, as though it hadn't been made painfully obvious seconds before.

“Uncle Zixun?” Jin Ling watched as Lan Zhan took the spirit into a qiankun pouch, sealing it and pocketing it.

“I didn’t think it would be here.”

“What do you mean?”

“Thirteen years ago, I launched a search for Jin Zixun’s body. But his coffin was empty.”

Wei Ying was almost struck dumb. “What do you need his body for?”

Lan Zhan turned, giving Wei Ying an inscrutable look. “To confirm something.”

“Hold on! What’s the Hundred Holes Curse?” Jin Ling asked, looking morbidly curious at the head.

“It’s a type of curse; one of the most malicious and cruel out there. The victim won’t feel anything until it’s too late, and by then, holes will have appeared across his whole body, rotting and festering until he dies.”

Jin Ling looked disgusted. “What a horrible curse!”

“It’s the most feared curse of all. Only someone like Wei Wuxian would use that.”

Wei Ying resisted the urge to roll his eyes. Why on earth did this Clan leader Yao appear at the most inopportune moments? And always to slander him, too! Aiya, he really needed to change his attitude of his; one cannot get far if one only lives to slander others.

Ah, but it didn’t really matter, did it? He could yell that he didn’t do it until he was blue in the face, but in the end, he was always guilty in the eyes of the cultivating world.

“I am unbiased. However, it is unfair to condemn a man without evidence.”

He- wait, what? Lan Zhan? *Huh* ?

Lan Zhan continued as though he wasn’t completely upending Wei Ying’s view of him.

“Although Wei Ying cultivated the dark arts, he had morals and principles. Hurting someone else for personal gain is not like him.”

Oh.

Oh.

A familiar spike of resentful energy caused Wei Ying to stiffen, and he turned, straining his ears- ah. The sound of chains. Wait, this situation-!

“The Ghost General!” Jin Ling shouted, his face pinched with anger.

“Jin Ling, don’t be an idiot! You can’t fight him! Back off!” *He’s not under my control, damn it! He could kill you!* Wei Ying added internally.

In response, Jin Ling merely pulled out a flare and sent it into the sky.

Wei Ying watched as the flare went off, fighting the absurd urge to laugh. If he did, there would be no saving his reputation as a madman anymore.

First of all, Jin Ling carried a Yunmeng Jiang flare with him despite being affiliated with the Jin clan, so there was that. And now, since he let off that flare, that means that *he* will be coming.

Oh, how the fates must hate the Yiling Patriarch. This was a special sort of torture reserved for such a sinful soul like him, isn't it?

Chapter End Notes

no end notes for this one, but I do want to ask you all a question; not too sure if anyone would listen though, heh. Do you find these chapters boring? They're technically just copies of the episodes, after all, and I bet they aren't as good as the actual episodes. Still, I can't skip over this. It's crucial to the story and buildup, so... should I write longer chapters and cut out some dialogue? I've already done that, but still... it irks me. I know it's a crossover, but I intend to stay as close to canon as possible.

Crossover stuff won't actually happen until the second Burial Siege, though. Not really, anyway.

Wei Ying's not a good nominee for an Oscar, like come on, even without playing wangxian lan zhan would've known in the first five episodes. He's being so painfully obvious it hurts me.

Also, my transcription notes for the next episode spans roughly 3 pages on size 11 font. Help me. I'm rather tired right now, so if there are any errors, comment and I'll do my best to fix them tomorrow! I have classes starting, so... updates might come once every two to three days? I'm sorry guys, I'm just as excited to continue the story, but I really can't fail this year. I'll try to work on it during my breaks and stuff, but chapters will come slower.

Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

Would you believe me if I said I wrote this in class, right alongside my notes? I really did, but I promised I still listened in class. This was just to keep me from falling asleep.

Aiyoh, I'm so bored of writing canon, but I've delighted in adding little bits of Wei Ying's suffering. Is that bad? It probably is.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“Shoo! Scram!” Wei Ying hissed, but Wen Ning just stared at him uncomprehendingly.

He could almost smell the ozone from Zidian, and panic fuelled him to disregard Hua Cheng’s instructions again. Whatever, he was a “do first, ask questions later” kind of guy anyway. Wen Ning was alive, and he wasn’t going to lose him again.

“Go away, damn it!” Wei Ying layered his voice with a small amount of resentful energy. That did the trick. Wen Ning jerked into action, leaping away into the fog. Wei Ying breathed a sigh of relief, but it came too soon when Wen Ning was slammed into the ground.

Oh no.

There, looking like an avenging angel on his sword, Jiang Cheng stood, his face dark. His lip curled when he saw Wei Ying, and the latter fought the urge to bolt.

Wei Ying pushed at Wen Ning with his mind, putting all his energy into one command: *Leave*.

To his credit, Wen Ning really did try to go. But Jiang Cheng was there, blocking his every path with Zidian. Finally, Wen Ning lashed one of his chains around a dead tree and pulled. With a colossal groan, it was uprooted, and Wen Ning hurled it towards Jiang Cheng, taking this opportunity to slip into the fog.

“Second Master Lan, isn’t Gusu Lan supposed to be against demonic cultivation? Why did you let Wen Ning go, on Dafan Mountain?” Jiang Cheng scowled. “”

Lan Zhan merely stared at Jiang Cheng impassively, but Wei Ying saw how his jaw tightened slightly. Oh. Lan Zhan was angry.

“Hanguang-jun doesn’t say much, anyway!”

“You again.” The smell of ozone grew, and Wei Ying flinched. “Once is a coincidence, but twice...”

“Coincidence? What coincidence?”

By way of reply, Jiang Cheng took out Zidian again, and unconsciously, Wei Ying took a step back, his brain scrambling for strategies. No resentful energy; his body couldn’t sustain it anymore, but he didn’t have anymore talismans on him.

So talking it was, then.

“Ah! Not this again. I already told you, Sect leader Jiang. Zidian already hit me once, and nothing happened! What, you don’t trust your own spiritual weapon?”

“Whether I trust it or not is none of your goddamn business. Today, I’ll figure out what—or who—you are.”

Lan Zhan moved, gliding forward serenely to place himself squarely between Wei Ying and Jiang Cheng.

Jiang Cheng did not look pleased. “Lan Wangji! Why are you always in my way?”

Jin Ling stepped forward, looking uncharacteristically hesitant. “Uncle, Mo Xuanyu is a guest of the Gusu clan.”

“A guest?” Jiang Cheng’s laughter was a little manic, but he did put away Zidian. “Second Master Lan, I don’t know why you’re shielding this lunatic. I will be watching you very closely from now on.”

“But uncle! The Ghost General-”

“Shut up! You idiot, I thought I told you to not act by yourself! And-”

Jiang Cheng left, pulling Jin Ling with him. Lan Zhan remained still until their voices faded away before moving towards the fallen corpse and examining it.

“Lan Zhan?”

“Not right.” Lan Zhan pointed to the head of one of the zombies, and Wei Ying crouched down to take a closer look.

Stitches. Done with black thread, they connected the head to the body. A further check revealed no other stitches, but it was clear that this head didn’t belong to the body.

“All of them have it.”

“No wonder that crazy woman screamed when she heard chopping. She must have seen them cutting up the bodies. But why...”

“The body is harmless.”

“Ah, I see... Stitching a head onto a body to trick it and repress its resentful energy...” Wei Ying murmured, reaching out to check the head. “Smart. Oh?”

“I’ve never seen that before.”

“Neither have I, but-” Wei Ying hummed thoughtfully, tracing the strokes. “It reminds me of something I came across while- er, while I was researching Spirit Lure Flags and their uses. The strokes are for warding off spirits, but this one is reversed, so it summons them.”

“Summons them?”

“Yeah. It’s only for a short amount of time, but just like that, you can turn a corpse into a ferocious zombie.”

“This was a testing ground.”

“Remote, with people nearby... if Jin Zixun’s head hadn’t acted up, this would have remained a secret.” Wei Ying nodded. This checked all the boxes of some evil magic lab.

“The head could be our lead.”

“Not likely. How hasn’t it been spotted in eleven years?”

“This head was not always here.”

“You’re right, you’re right... someone is playing weiqi now, and we’re the soldiers.” Wei Ying laughed, the sound out of place and at odds with the current situation. But there was finally something to keep his attention again!

“Interesting coincidence.”

“Not a coincidence.”

“You think so too? Both times we’ve found these body parts, and both times you were here.” Wei Ying rocked back on his heels, casting an appreciative eye around. “Still... This trap array is good. It would be a shame to break it- Aiya, I was just joking, Lan Zhan. I know, I know. Could you step out for a bit?”

“Mn.”

The cornerstones were easy enough to find, but the well of resentful energy was huge. It had been festering for a while now, and it would take some time to break the seal. Still, it was beneficial in a way, seeing as he could just push the energy around to break the array and not draw the resentful energy into himself.

Silently, the cornerstones rose, the blood red paintings on them pulsing intermittently. Wei Ying directed the energy, overloading each seal and forcing the stone to crack.

“Shatter.”

There was a quiet boom, and the rocks shattered into dust, the pieces raining down around him. The temperature warmed, and a few weak rays of sunlight struggled through the fog, burning it away slowly.

When Wei Ying found Lan Zhan, he was directing Gusu disciples to take down the bodies and give them proper burials. An array had already been set up, absorbing the resentful energy. He watched as Lan Zhan inclines his head slightly, which seemed to be a paragraph of instructions alone.

Luckily, Wei Ying was used to interpreting these gestures, and he simply smiled as Lan Zhan made his way over to him.

“Array?”

“All broken up. Everything should be back to normal soon.”

A rustle, almost directly behind them. Wei Ying turns, his shoulders tense, but they relax when he sees the mad woman from before.

“Oh, it’s just her.” Wei Ying sighed, watching as she toddled over to a mound where toys were scattered on top and played with a toy drum, giggling like it was the most interesting thing she had ever seen.

Toy drums... Wei Ying thought of a comforting pressure wrapped around his legs, of soil under his fingernails and the rhythmic sounds of the toy drum. He wondered...

Almost in a trance, he knelt, his hand reaching out to the toys- but a vicious snarl interrupted him, and the woman clamped down hard on his wrist.

“Ow! Stop that, it hurts! I won’t touch your toys, okay?” Wei Ying shouted, but his eyes were drawn to the mound. There were parts where the soil had crumbled away, and Wei Ying swore he saw fingers poking out.

“Lan Zhan.”

“Mn.”

“Sorry about this,” Wei Ying muttered. “But I really need to know.” He darted behind the woman, prodding her acupuncture point gently, and catching her when she fell. He leaned her against a tree and turned to the mound, pushing away the dirt with his bare hands until Lan Zhan swept it away with a clean sweep of Bichen and a burst of spiritual energy.

Bodies were stuffed into the mound, seemingly preserved at the time of death. Wei Ying checked them all over, and realised that they all had one similarity: a delicate mark, shimmering like ice.

“Mark of Frost.”

“You know who did this?”

“Mn. Xiao Xingchen’s mark. Only he can do this.”

“Huh. I’ve never heard of him. Which sect was he from?”

“Sectless. Baoshan Shanren trained him.”

Wei Ying’s breath stopped. So Xiao Xingchen was his...shixiong? Would Wei Ying even be accepted as a disciple- no. He had to stop this train of thought before he spiralled again.

“Lan Zhan, help me get these bodies out?”

Along the way, Lan Jingyi joined them, and when they finally dragged all the bodies out and covered them with sheets, Jingyi finally spoke.

“This trap array is so evil...” he muttered. “It must be demonic-”

“Ah, ah ah! Don’t blame this one on the demonic cultivators. The trap array was created over a hundred years ago, and it was a great help, I’ll have you know! They trapped large numbers of zombies and kept the people safe!”

Jingyi looked gobsmacked by this revelation.

“A sword is just a sword. It’s not evil; its owner is.” Lan Zhan said softly, and Wei Ying chuckled quietly. Trust him to put it so poetically!

“Wait, the hand!” Jingyi pointed at one of the corpses they had recovered.

Wei Ying glanced at the wrist. “Soul Rend.”

Wei Ying nodded. “The person who put the arm there and the person who created this array are one and the same. But this one is kind of a...hm, a trial, I suppose. The array is incomplete.”

“This means we were just the clean up squad. Someone wanted this array to be broken, so we were lured here by the demonic hand.”

“But...why couldn’t they break the array themselves? And why are they doing this?” Jingyi tilted his head.

“Who knows? It’s too early to tell.” Wei Ying grinned shamelessly. “Besides, it’s not like *everyone* can break the array.”

And just like that, Jingyi was back to normal. He scoffed.

“You’re shameless.”

“I am!” Wei Ying agreed happily.

“Hanguang-jun! News from Cloud Recesses; the demonic arm has escaped!”

“Minimise casualties. Send disciples there to find and restrain the arm.”

“Noted, Hanguang-jun!”

“How would we even know where to go?” Jingyi spluttered. “It’s not like we have dogs to track it.”

Wei Ying shuddered. “Dogs? I have something better. Ta da!”

Jingyi looked unimpressed. “A Compass of Ill Winds. Everyone knows those things are finicky.”

“Ah, but I know this little thing!” Wei Ying held it out in his palm, nudging the resentful energy in the compass. Dipping his fingers in the blood red mist dripping from the compass, he sketched a talisman in the air, grinning at Jingyi.

“It’s a spell to track things. If the arm can point to the head, then vice versa will work too.” Wei Ying lifted Jin Zixun’s head, exposing the sigil carved onto it. The dark red energy rushed to the sigil like overexcited children, and Wei Ying cast a glance at the compass. Once the sigil appeared superimposed over the bronze surface, he tucked the head into Lan Zhan’s qiankun bag and examined the compass.

“But this kind of spell doesn’t last too long. I hope it’ll be enough.”

The compass spun madly for a second before settling on the northeast direction.

Wei Ying turned to Lan Zhan. “Well, on with the trip, I suppose.”

The spell ran out in Qinghe. There were a lot of people gaping as Lan Zhan walked into town, and Wei Ying wondered how he could keep a straight face, even with all of the attention on him.

“Hanguang-jun.”

“Hanguang-jun.”

Lan Zhan watched the two people who had bowed to him leave, then turned to Wei Ying. “That arm is pure evil. It will leave traces wherever it goes.”

Goodness! Can’t you show a little feeling for once, Lan Zhan?

“Guess we’ll need to find another way, what with this spell being worn out and all.” Wei Ying tucked the compass into his pockets, grimacing at the temperature. “It’s too hot now... wait a minute. Lan Zhan! Look, desserts! Goodness, I really missed these.”

“For you, young master! This one’s on the house.”

“Oh, thank you!” The icy dessert was sweet and creamy, and Wei Ying thoroughly enjoyed stuffing his face. But he did offer Lan Zhan some, and the latter declined.

“Yiling Patriarch, five cents for one, ten cents for three! You’ll regret not buying these!”

Someone bumped into him, and Wei Ying glanced over. Oh. A travelling salesman grinned up at him.

“Would you like some pictures of the Yiling Patriarch, young man? They can help ward off evil, just stick them on your door!”

Wei Ying was too busy glaring a hole into the pictures to answer. What the hell were those pictures? They looked like demons on their own! No, this would not do! He couldn't in good faith allow his name to be sullied any further.

“Wei Wuxian was a handsome gentleman! He ranked fourth of the most handsome men in his time, you know. Fourth! He was known for his good looks and charm! What did you draw here, hm?”

The salesman stammered for a while before seemingly seeing something behind him. A golden blur shot past Wei Ying and slammed into the poor man, sending him to the floor.

“You dare mention Wei Wuxian in my presence? You even shouted his name out loud! Do you want me to kill you?” An obnoxiously familiar voice rang out, and Wei Ying resisted the urge to flinch at the hatred in his voice.

“Uhm... Jin Ling-”

“Lunatic! Get lost!”

“What are you going to do, huh? Capture me like some spoil of war and gift me to your uncle? Don't forget how that ended the last time you tried. If I recall, you were flat on the floor...”

Jin Ling just smirked—the audacity of this kid!—and whistled. A bark answered him, and Wei Ying stumbled back, his breathing growing shallow and rapid. Oh no. No, no no no, of course he'd have a-

“Dog! Lan Zhan! Lan- Lan Zhan! Help me!” Wei Ying barely managed to get his legs working, and suddenly, he was five again, running from a pack of vicious dogs amidst a sea of people.

But the smell of sandalwood grounded him, and he peeked out from behind his eyelids. Belatedly, he realised how this must look: A grown man clinging to another man, and Wei Ying's feet were almost completely off the ground.

Jin Ling was gone, along with that accursed dog, so Wei Ying quickly scrambled off Lan Zhan.

“Uh. I, well, Hanguang-jun, have you heard of any leads?”

“Zombies attacked at a pass last night. Many were injured.”

“Oh? We should go check that out then!”

“Wait, wait! I beseech you young masters, don’t go to that hill. It’s dangerous! It’s also called Man-eating Hill. There dwells a monster in a castle who will snatch up passing travellers and eat them! And, and! All intruders have been eaten; bones and all!”

“Huh? No one makes it out, you say?” Wei Ying grinned, and the man took a step back.

“None! I promise you this; I know everything here!”

“Well then, someone must have leaked this information then. Lan Zhan, let’s go~”

Chapter End Notes

I've already got a bunch of scenes planned for the ending, hehe ;>

Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

oh my goodness, 10k hits!! :O This one was a pleasure to write, but it kinda... got away from me. I swear I was supposed to write canon, but my hand slipped...

And before you ask, yes, there will be conciliation between Jiang Cheng and Wei Ying. I refuse to not give them at least something to work with, you know? This is probably my first time writing for Jiang Cheng, so next chapter will include a POV from him :DD Jiang Cheng is a super interesting character, and I'm going to dissect him- er, character study-wise, not surgically.

Hope you guys enjoy this chapter!

Warnings: Wei Ying has a panic attack and has to be knocked unconscious. The panic attack starts from "Fairy!" and ends at "A gentle pressure hit his neck".

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Wei Ying catches Lan Zhan staring at him, and he could almost hear the burning question on his lips.

"You can ask, Lan Zhan."

"Are... you scared of dogs?" The question was hesitant, like Lan Zhan was afraid. Now *that* was a thought.

Wei Ying sighed and shook his head. This conversation always came up at some point. Better now than never. "Yeah. When I was little, I lived on the streets. Many times, I'd have to fight dogs for food, and one day...well, I was cornered by the dogs. It wasn't a pretty experience."

Lan Zhan's expression twisted, but before he could say anything, a loud bark echoed through the forest.

"Dog! Where is it, where is it?" Wei Ying ducked behind Lan Zhan again, peeking out hesitantly. It didn't sound close, but his brain was telling him to run, to get out of here before they bite-

"It's not close. It's Fairy."

"Fairy?" Wei Ying asked dubiously. "What's Fairy?"

“Jin Ling’s spiritual dog.” Lan Zhan stated, as though Fairy wasn’t the most horrendous name one could think of for a dog. He must have gotten that from Jiang Cheng, the poor boy.

“Fairy’s barking? Okay, so what?”

“Spiritual dogs do not bark unless something is wrong with their masters. We will have to investigate.”

“Wait, wait! Don’t go so fast, Lan Zhan!” In his panic, Wei Ying didn’t notice that Lan Zhan let himself be clung to as he drifted towards the sound of barking.

“Mn. Man Eating Castle.”

“Looks more like a tomb to me- get away from me...please.” Wei Ying directed the last part to the overenthusiastic dog frisking around their legs, whimpering when Fairy got a little too close.

“This was a spiritual weapon’s work. Let’s go.”

The inside of the tomb—castle, whatever—was dark and dry, but when Wei Ying stepped through, a cacophony of voices screamed in his head, and he almost blacked out from the pain.

Lan Zhan turned to him, a questioning look in his eyes, and Wei Ying waved off his concerns.

“Ahh, it’s nothing, Hanguang-jun. The voices are just a little loud, that’s all. Whew, is it just me, or is it really cold in here?”

Lan Zhan frowned, but said nothing.

They opened a secret door, leading down to—what else, other than more coffins? Here, the air was freezing, and Wei Ying wondered how Lan Zhan didn’t even show any changes. Couldn’t he feel the chill? Even the coffins were cold!

“My apologies.” Wei Ying muttered, grasping the lid of the closest coffin to him and hauling the lid off. His muscles screamed, and he barely bit back a groan of pain as the lid crashed to the floor.

He caught the sight of a sabre before he coughed once, something wet and burning sliding up his throat.

“-Ying! Wei Ying!”

Who...? Who called him?

It was so cold. So bitterly cold. Among the discordant voices, he clearly heard someone, their voice full of warmth, calling his name. He clung to that warm voice like a sailor on a stormy sea keeps a lighthouse in his view, and warmth pressed against his wrists. His meridians-!

He jerked out of his trance, trying to move his frozen tongue to- to- to what? Make excuses? Lan Zhan called his name, didn't he? And why on earth was he staring at a torn up wall? Did... did he do that?

“*Wei Ying*.”

“Hey, Lan Zhan.” Wei Ying sighed, meeting Lan Zhan's eyes—oh goodness, was that worry? And was that Jin Ling behind them?—and smiling tiredly. “How long have you known?”

“Dafan Mountain.”

“Ah. Well, I guess I embarrassed myself for nothing, huh?” Wei Ying tried to move his fingers, but they seemed unwilling to do anything else other than twitch uselessly. “Do you have any warming talismans?”

“It is too warm.”

“Lan Zhan. Please.” But before he could say anything else, the tomb groaned ominously. Oh, of course this happens. Why wouldn't it? “We have to go!”

Lan Zhan scooped both Jin Ling and Wei Ying up, leaping towards the entrance, but with two people, he was weighed down. Wei Ying reached out to the chill, forcing the tomb to remain upright for just a few more seconds.

And a few more seconds was all they needed, when Lan Zhan practically flew out from the entrance, which collapsed behind him immediately.

“Wei Ying.”

“Not now, Lan Zhan. Please, you have to go. Fairy, he's-”

Lan Zhan frowned severely; a surprising expression on his face as it is.

“I will not leave you again.” He seemed to hide some deeper meaning to his words, but Wei Ying was too tired to take it anymore than at face value.

Wei Ying smiled weakly. Stubborn, stubborn Lan Zhan. “I'm not going anywhere. I'll stay here, Lan Zhan. Now go.”

Finally, Lan Zhan acquiesced, turning to go chase the dog. Wei Ying turned his attention to Jin Ling.

“Aiya, you troublesome child.” Wei Ying muttered fondly. “Forcing me to reveal myself to Hanguang-jun; have you no shame? Still, I can't let you off with that curse.”

It's just a curse. Wei Ying had lived—and died—through more. He rolled up Jin Ling's pants leg, tugging at the resentful energy that coursed below his leg. What a headache, was Wei Ying's last thought before he stepped into the dreamworld.

“You’ve got a mother to give birth to you, but no one to teach you!” The jeering voices of children came to Wei Ying, and he looked down at himself. He was back in his Yiling Patriarch’s robes, and he watched as Jin Ling—barely six years old—hit one of the children.

“Ow! Your mother would be so disappointed in you! Oh, I forgot, you don’t have one!”

“Shut up!” Jin Ling screamed, his face red and streaked with tears. “Shut up, shut up!”

The scene changed.

Wei Ying watched as Jin Ling knelt at a pavilion surrounded by lotuses, and slowly, he joined the child.

“Mister? Who are you?”

Wei Ying hummed. “I’m your uncle.”

“Uncle? So you know my parents?” Jin Ling’s eyes shone with a light that Wei Ying understood; he’d grown up without his parents, so he would naturally be desperate for any information about his parents.

“I do. Your mother—my shijie—was a wonderful woman.”

“And my father?”

Wei Ying turned to the portrait. “He loved your mother very much.”

The scene changes again.

Wei Ying was standing in an endless field of lotuses, the water barely rippling in the windless air.

A-Xian.

“ *Shijie* ,” Wei Ying breathed. He’d recognise that voice anywhere.

A-Xian.

“ *Shijie* ! Where are you?”

A-Xian, look.

Wei Ying turned, and there she was. Standing beside Jin Zixuan, both of them were radiant and healthy.

“ *Shijie* !” Wei Ying reached forward, but they vanished, and he was back there.

That suffocating, crushing darkness in the starless void.

COWARD.

TRAITOR.

YOU MADE US WAIT.

No, Wei Ying wanted to say. No, he didn't want this. But he couldn't speak. He couldn't hear, couldn't smell, couldn't see.

The howling voices picked up in strength, ice frosting over the lake rapidly and withering the lotuses—since when was there a lake...?

“Uncle?”

And suddenly, it's blissfully quiet.

Jin Ling was back, standing beside Wei Ying. A tiny hand slipped into his, and he looked down numbly.

“Why did Mom and Dad throw me away?”

“Jin Ling... they didn't abandon you.” Wei Ying muttered, swaying on his feet. “They're just...far away. So far away.”

“Oh.”

“Do you want to meet them?” Wei Ying asked gently. He could. He could simply lie down now and give up, if Jin Ling said no, he didn't, thank you-

“Yes. Will you take me to them?” Jin Ling looked up at him, and Wei Ying saw his *shijie* staring back at him, the same determined brown eyes poking holes into his mind and letting the light in.

Something clicked. This was his nephew. He would take care of him, or die trying. The curse shifted, crawling onto Wei Ying's skin and curling up contentedly.

“Of course. I'll take you to them.”

“You'd better not lie!” Jin Ling threatened, but he had a bright smile on his face.

“I won't, I won't. Come on, Jin Ling.”

Wei Ying drew in a shuddering gasp, stumbling away from Jin Ling. His legs—his real legs, not the him in his memories—felt like jelly, and he could feel the curse taking root, spreading through his body.

“Honestly...” Wei Ying shook his head, checking Jin Ling was stable before turning to leave. Something landed hard across his back, throwing him away from Jin Ling. Something cracked, and Wei Ying groaned, climbing to his feet slowly.

Jiang Cheng was there. And he had dogs.

“What’s the big deal? I just saved Jin Ling-”

“We meet again, Wei Wuxian.”

Wei Ying froze. What...? Jiang Cheng knew? He...he knew already? This was the worst. He didn’t even resist when Jiang Cheng tied him up with Zidian and hauled him back to a nearby inn.

“So it’s true.” Jiang Cheng’s voice snapped Wei Ying out of his thoughts. “The Yiling Patriarch is back.”

“Jiang Cheng...”

“Fairy!”

Wei Ying’s vision tunnelled. The- the dog, it was coming closer, and Wei Ying could hear its snarls, just like fierce corpses, and its teeth- oh god its teeth-! He could feel it tearing into his skin, drawing blood, and Wei Ying whimpered, the feeling of jaws tearing him apart so bright and clear in his mind.

“Shijie...” He whispered, blood spilling from his lips. “Help me...”

“What did you say?” A concussive force crashed across his cheek, and Wei Ying let his head hang to the side, his cheek throbbing and his ears ringing.

“You! You aren’t worthy to call out her name!”

"Shijie," Wei Ying choked, and he could see her *dying* , he could see her directly in front of him, smiling that same sweet smile; except this time, it was tainted with blood. "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry-"

A-Xian. There's no need to cry.

Dimly, he heard Jiang Cheng inhale sharply. "What is this?"

I chose to do this for you. The two of you...have much to talk about. I hope you can sort it out.

"Jie jie! Wei Wuxian, stop tainting my sister's memory with your dark magic!"

"Not my fault, not my fault!" Wei Ying gasped. "Please, please please, Lan Zhan, *shijie* , Jiang Cheng, anyone-"

A gentle pressure hit his neck, then blissful silence.

“-condition.”

“I see.”

“I don’t know what’s wrong with him, but I’ve never seen someone with more resentful energy clinging to them before. But he will be fine. His body is... different.”

“That’s all. Dismissed.”

The other person left, and Wei Ying was left to come to his own senses slowly.

“Awake already?”

Wei Ying cracked open his eyelids, peering up at the blurry face.

“Jiang Cheng?” He croaked.

A gentle slap across his head that sent his head spinning, then: “that’s Sect Leader Jiang to you, Wei Wuxian.”

“Ugh, fine, Sect Leader Jiang. Happy?”

“Not with that tone.”

Silence befell them for a moment, before Wei Ying managed to pluck up enough courage to ask.

“Sect lead- Jiang Cheng. What happened?”

Jiang Cheng stared at him incredulously. “You. You don’t remember.”

“Well, I heard shijie’s- Jiang Yanli’s voice, but... I don’t know. I wasn’t in a good headspace, as you could probably tell.” Wei Ying offered Jiang Cheng a wry smile, hoping the latter would ignore the slip of his tongue.

“Idiot. Of course you don’t remember. I had to knock you out before you destroyed this whole inn with resentful energy.”

"I- *what* ?" Wei Ying felt faint.

"Where have you been these few years, huh? I've been-" Jiang Cheng stopped himself before he could go any further.

“You- you don’t hate me?”

Jiang Cheng sighed, and for a brief moment, there he was. That antagonistic brother, hiding a heart of gold. “I want to. Gods, you don’t know how many years I spent looking for you so that I could beat you up.”

Wei Ying opened his mouth, but Jiang Cheng raised a hand and he fell silent.

“But... I don’t think I could ever hate you.” Jiang Cheng seemed reluctant to admit it. “I’m hurt, mostly.”

Wei Ying wet his lips. “Oh.”

“Yeah. Hurt that you decided that jumping off a fucking cliff would solve your problems. What happened to the Twin Prides of Yunmeng huh? What-” Jiang Cheng cut himself off, taking a deep breath. “Sorry.”

“No. I’m sorry, Jiang Cheng. For...for everything.” Wei Ying tried to force more words out, but coughing followed, wracking his thin body—since when had he been so weak?—and no more words were spoken as Jiang Cheng poured him some water infused with herbs.

“Will you let me go?” Wei Ying rasped after finishing the liquid. Bitter.

“To where?”

“Lan Zhan is waiting for me.”

“Lan- oh, Hanguang-jun?” Jiang Cheng rolled his eyes. “He's waiting downstairs. I caught Jin Ling trying to smuggle you out—that brat—and he had alerted Hanguang-jun. It wasn't a pretty situation.”

“I can imagine.”

Another moment of silence, and Wei Ying was just about to tell Jiang Cheng to *spit it out, damn it*, when Jiang Cheng spoke with a false air of calm.

“So? Are you going to tell me anything at all?”

Wei Ying sighed. “What do you want to know?”

Chapter End Notes

Wowie, this one was a fun chapter! Why is Jiang Cheng so calm? What is Hua Cheng and Xie Lian doing? Who knows ;P

I stole the dog scene from the Untamed, since I thought it was a really powerful scene (as in, I almost cried). And as for Wei Ying's panic attacks, I based them off mine; I get panic attacks when I'm overwhelmed, and they can be as mild as just erratic breathing to full on crying, breathlessness and stuff. The latter usually only happens when I'm tired or fatigued though, and in this case, Wei Ying definitely is tired, in more ways than one

I am planning a SVSSS x MDZS crossover (I love crossovers, sue me) from Lan Zhan's POV after this fic is complete, so do look forward to that too ;p

Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

Whew! This chapter was quite hard to wrangle with all the changing POVs, but I think I pulled it off okay. What do you think of Jiang Cheng and Lan Zhan's POV :D??

Again, canon will resume next chapter (yahoo...) which means more transcribing episodes. I hope these few chapters were a breath of fresh air to you guys!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Jiang Cheng explodes.

“Everything!” He sweeps his arms around, and Wei Ying still has the nerve to look only mildly interested—or perhaps that was the herbs kicking in.

“Hm. What is everything? How did I die? You saw. How did I come back? Mo Xuanyu got hold of one of my manuscripts, but he botched it; not by his own design, he got one of my unfinished pieces. Maybe I should finish some-”

“Wei Wuxian!” Jiang Cheng roared. “Enough of your meandering! How did you manage to not be summoned for thirteen years, huh? Every damned Sect was out there, looking for you!”

“I can’t tell you.”

The seriousness in Wei Ying’s voice stopped him, and Jiang Cheng looked at Wei Ying—oh god, he had that look in his eye, the one that screamed ‘I really want to tell you but for the sake of mystery I can’t.’ That look infuriated Jiang Cheng to no end, but there was no time to yell when Wei Ying doubled over again, clawing at his hair and his breathing erratic.

Jiang Cheng wasted no time in shouting for the healer and pressed his fingers to Wei Ying’s wrist, sending a stream of spiritual energy to him. Wei Ying was cold, awfully cold, and even the healer looked disturbed when he grabbed Wei Ying’s wrist.

“Sect Leader Jiang, with all due respect, I have to knock him out again-”

“Do what you must.” Jiang Cheng gritted his teeth, pushing more spiritual energy into Wei Ying to force the cold away. The healer nodded grimly and pushed needles into Wei Ying’s pressure points, and he immediately slumped down, dead to the world.

“Well?” Jiang Cheng demanded, papering over his worry with anger.

“Sect Leader Jiang, this is far beyond my expertise, if you'll forgive this humble one. I don't detect anything wrong with him spiritually and physically, but he shows some signs of qi deviation.”

"Dismissed. Do not tell Hanguang-jun about this."

"Understood." The healer bowed and made to leave, but before that, he hesitated. “Sect Leader Jiang?”

“Spit it out.”

“Whatever Young Master Mo is doing, it is advisable to continue.”

“What are the consequences?”

“If left untreated, and if he continues down this path... Death will be inevitable.”

Jiang Cheng inhaled, holding the breath and waving away the healer. When the healer left, he looked at Wei Ying, frowning at him. Thirteen years with no contact, and he shows up like nothing has changed. But something had changed.

There had been a spike of resentful energy about six years ago, but it was quickly suppressed. Nie Mingjue, Lan Xichen and Lan Wangji had all been dispatched to deal with the situation, but they had been tight lipped about what they had seen, only stating that the situation need not require any more attention.

Then there was the fact that Nie Mingjue had pulled him aside and presented him with Chengqing.

“We met...two beings. They claimed that they were god and ghost king, and that they were uninterested in seeing the world burn.”

“And you believe them?”

Nie Mingjue sighed, rolling Chengqing around in his hands. “I don’t know. They certainly looked familiar with the terrain, and we saw things that bordered on the impossible.”

Hearing Sect Leader Nie speak like this was certainly a new experience, but Jiang Cheng managed to get the gist of it; a man dressed in red and a man dressed in white had shown up, dragging another man that Nie Mingjue called a ‘dead weight’ and a mute ghost who Jiang Cheng strongly suspected was Wei Ying.

“And how did you get a hold of Chengqing?” Jiang Cheng narrowed his eyes suspiciously. “I bet it on information—some information, that Hua Cheng or whatever his name is—”

“What did you say?” Nie Mingjue interrupted.

“What? Hua Cheng?”

“Yes. Is that the ghost in red?”

Jiang Cheng threw his hands up in frustration. “Hell if I know! He was behind a red curtain, and I only saw the man in white come out! He could have a whole army behind there and we wouldn’t be aware!”

“So this... Hua Cheng brokers information?” Nie Mingjue narrowed his eyes. “How come we haven’t heard of him?”

“Not just information; you can bet all sorts of things in that depraved gambling den. He runs a whole city filled with ghosts, apparently. It was hard enough for Lan Wangji and I to find that godforsaken location, but apparently the forbidden section of the Lan library has enough texts on ghosts for Lan Wangji to pinpoint a location.”

Nie Mingjue’s eyebrows disappeared into his hairline. “Lan Wangji? The Second Jade?”

“That’s the one.”

“He was involved in this damned expedition?”

“Yes.” Jiang Cheng sighed. “He’s been involved in anything that involves Wei Wuxian. Sometimes, I wonder if he’s looking for him for revenge or...something else.”

“Second Master Lan does seem to be a little more morose these days,” Nie Mingjue said thoughtfully.

Jiang Cheng pulled himself out of his thoughts, glancing back at Wei Ying.

“You idiot, what sort of mess have you gotten yourself into now, huh?”

Lan Zhan had no idea how many times he’d walked around each table already.

No.

That wasn’t quite right now. He had walked around each of the five tables four times, and he was contemplating walking around each table one more time before footsteps sounded from above him, making for the stairs.

Jiang Cheng stormed down the stairs, his eyes dark.

“Wei Wuxian is upstairs, resting. Do not touch him.” Jiang Cheng growled. “Jin Ling! Let’s go.”

The young boy who had brought Lan Zhan over scrambled to his feet, gravitating to Jiang Cheng’s side.

Lan Zhan didn’t give the man another second of his attention, sweeping up the stairs and into Wei Ying’s room.

Wei Ying looked peaceful, in a body that wasn’t quite his but retained some of his traits. It was becoming a game of sorts, for Lan Zhan to pick out what was becoming more and more

like Wei Ying.

The way his eyes and lips were always slanted in the ghost of a smile. That was Wei Ying. His eyes were a different shape than before though; that was Mo Xuanyu. His cheeks were gaunt, but they had more colour in them than before- before everything went wrong. Gently, Lan Zhan reached out, pressing his fingers to Wei Ying's shoulders.

Tense.

Spiritual energy would help, so he sent a little wisp through, watching Wei Ying's face closely. Soon, that gaunt and pinched face relaxed, and Wei Ying seemed to sleep a little easier.

Lan Zhan traced Wei Ying's face, committing it to memory before resting his head by the bed, closing his eyes. His hand was wrapped around Wei Ying's, and he kept a steady stream of spiritual energy flowing.

A sound knocks Lan Zhan out of his thoughts, but he keeps his eyes closed and his breathing even.

"Ah, sorry San Lang. It must be my luck."

"Nonsense. Gege didn't do anything wrong; this one was just clumsy."

A pair of footsteps stepped forward softly, another circling around the table. Two men, maybe more.

Unfortunately for them, he was a light sleeper. He blinked open when one of them touched his shoulder and immediately, he recognised the man in red.

"Hua *Chengzhu*?" Lan Zhan moved to block Wei Ying with his body, looking at the other man. "And..."

"Ah, you can just call me Xie Lian. We're here to see Wei Ying; San Lang sensed something wrong." Xie Lian smiled kindly, but there was an undercurrent of worry in his voice.

Lan Zhan turned the situation over in his head. Hua Cheng and Xie Lian seemed to be close to Wei Ying, but he was currently unconscious. But they might know how to help him. All Lan Zhan knew was that when he found Fairy, the dog practically flew to Jin Ling, who had been looking for him.

"You have to come. Uncle has caught that lunatic, and I heard shouts from the room they were in."

Lan Zhan was already running by the end of the sentence, Jin Ling shouting directions to him. The Jiang disciples had barely managed to restrain him from breaking down the door, but when the screams had abruptly stopped, Lan Zhan felt like his heart had stopped.

He was forced to sit down, and he spent that time running his fingers over the jade pendant that he always kept with him, tilting it this way and that to examine it. It used to be a pendant

hanging from Chengqing, but Wei Ying had pressed it into his hands and then-

The pendant was cold, but it had an iridescent sheen to it. Lan Zhan had already memorised how the pendant looked, and he would know it by how it felt against his calloused fingertips.

“I promise we won’t hurt him. We care for him.” Hua Cheng’s voice broke him out of his thoughts, and he realised that he must have been staring at the two of them for quite some time already.

Reluctantly, he stepped aside, still maintaining his transfer of spiritual energy. He watched as Hua Cheng frowned at Wei Ying, muttering something about how he ‘never listens’ and that he was ‘the brattiest disciple Hua Cheng ever had the displeasure of meeting.’ But instead of feeling angry, Lan Zhan realised that he felt...well. He didn’t really know.

He thought a lot, but not even half of those thoughts made it past his lips. Still, he knew he treasured Wei Ying. The man was incredible, and Lan Zhan could spend hours just listening to Wei Ying talk. If Wei Ying was the one who read the rulebooks, Lan Zhan had a sneaking suspicion that his lilting voice would distract Lan Zhan thoroughly.

“Can I ask for your name?”

Lan Zhan blinked slowly, looking at Xie Lian. Hua Cheng was drawing something in the air, silvery energy surrounding him and glimmering in characters that Lan Zhan did not recognise.

“My name is Lan Zhan, courtesy name Lan Wangji.”

Xie Lian laughed quietly. “Oh, I forgot courtesy names were a thing. Hm, okay then. Can I call you Lan Wangji, or Lan Zhan?”

Lan Zhan hesitated. He was close to Wei Ying, but still...

“I would prefer it if you called me by my courtesy name.”

Xie Lian nodded. “Of course. Right now, Wei Ying’s condition is irreversible, but it can be cured. San Lang is sealing off some of Wei Ying meridians; that will help to slow the flow of energy, but pouring spiritual energy into Wei Ying can actually hurt him. You have to circulate it slowly, push it along.”

“How?”

“It’s like... you have to slowly push out the resentful energy. It’s eating into this body’s meridians, and if Wei Ying doesn’t want to have a qi deviation, he’s going to have to severely limit his use of resentful energy.”

Lan Zhan clenched his jaw. Wei Ying had been using a lot of resentful energy lately, and... how had Lan Zhan never noticed? Wei Ying had always been warmer, but now he ran cold, cold enough to ask Lan Zhan for warming talismans on a sweltering day.

“What can he do?”

Xie Lian pursed his lips, casting his eyes up to the ceiling. “He can’t pull directly on resentful energy,” he said slowly. “But I believe...talismans and arrays will be alright. Those rely on written and drawn symbols, and they use minimal energy.”

“Done, gege. Wangji, please do tell this unruly disciple of mine to stop being so careless with his second life.” Hua Cheng steps away, and Lan Zhan couldn’t help but feel like something had changed about his appearance. He couldn’t place his finger on it though.

“I will do my best. Wei Ying does not listen.”

Hua Cheng just snorts and shakes his head. “Of course he doesn’t. I’ve never seen a human with less self preservation than Wei Ying.”

“San Lang,” Xie Lian chided. “We have to go now. Your silencing spell will not last long.”

“Of course, gege. Well, it was nice meeting you, Wangji. I hope Wei Ying was correct in trusting you with his most prized possession.” And with those cryptic words, there was a clatter of dice and they were gone, leaving Lan Zhan alone.

His prized possession? The jade pendant? Lan Zhan lifts it from his sash gently, turning it over and over again. He wasn’t sure what he was looking for. Some sort of carving or something? But there was nothing special about it, save for that strange gleam that jade definitely should not have.

“Wei Ying.” Lan Zhan murmured slowly. He didn’t know what he wanted to say, but he half expected Wei Ying to wake up and give him one of those smiles he wielded to lethal precision. Wei Ying slept on.

With a sigh, Lan Zhan ties the jade pendant back onto his sash and goes about preparing for bed, listening to Jiang Cheng and his disciples leaving the inn. Perhaps the sect leader still cared for Wei Ying after all, seeing as he left them two rooms.

Lan Zhan closes his eyes and falls into a dreamless sleep.

Chapter End Notes

So about that SVSSS x MDZS crossover... my hand slipped and I wrote about 1k words already. I'm planning to pick that project up after this one ends, but we'll see where it takes us. It's entirely from Lan Zhan's POV, so that should present a suitable challenge for me ;P I've decided to call it 'Hard Reset' for now, what do you think? :D

Chapter 18

Chapter Summary

Have this unique blend of canon and crossover for now while I work on the Yi City arc :D

I'm really excited about that arc, and especially the Second Burial Siege and the Lotus Pier scene. I am not ashamed to say I bawled my eyes out at the last one :D

And if you're wondering why wwx and jc can't talk it out, it's simple: they're both holding secrets. Jiang Cheng with his sister and that time when he lured the Wens away, wwx with... well, the golden core transfer. They're not on equal grounds, and so they can't demand each other to be honest. As long as this stays the status quo, there will literally be no headway made.

But fear not! If you cast your eyes around, you may see that this fic is now part of a collection. I'm planning on expanding this universe that I've created, since the main viewpoints of this fic are wwx's and hc's. Hope you all enjoy this chapter :D

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Wei Ying dreams. He dreams of a home by the river, a dock extending into the river. The days were idyllic, and he would fish under the shade of a willow tree. A-Yuan comes toddling towards him, a delighted shriek escaping his lips as Wei Ying scoops him up and tosses him into the air.

“Hey there, A-Yuan! How is *baba*, hm?”

“*Baba* is in the house.” A-Yuan says seriously. He lowers his voice comically, his eyes growing wide. “He is hurt.”

Hurt?

“Oh no. Will you take me to your *baba*? Maybe I can help him.”

A-Yuan immediately brightens, and Wei Ying’s heart melts. Wei Ying is dragged to the little home, and as he got closer, he realised why it looked so familiar. It was the Library Pavilion, but it was...different.

Warmer, somehow. There were signs of life, from the buckets that lay beside the well, to the laundry that billowed in the wind. It was so painfully domestic that Wei Ying had to take a break to swallow around the lump in his throat.

“*A-die* ?” Bless his little heart, A-Yuan looked so concerned that Wei Ying had to make a conscious effort to pull himself together.

“No. *A-die* is okay. Let’s go see *baba* , okay?”

Lan Zhan was in the main room, plucking at the strings of his guqin. It was a song he knew well, but Wei Ying couldn't remember how and where he had heard this song.

"Lan Zhan! A-Yuan told me you were hurt! Is he lying to me? You still look well!" Wei Ying turned to A-Yuan, who had shrunk behind Lan Zhan. "Lying is forbidden in Cloud Recesses, don't you know that?"

"Not lying."

"Lan Zhan? Where are you hurt?" Wei Ying scooted over to his side, and he watched as his husband stopped playing the guqin and folded his hands primly on his lap.

Lan Zhan grasps his wrist gently and guides it to his chest, pressing it over his heart.

"Here. Wei Ying spends so much time outside."

Wei Ying stared, feeling his face heat.

"Lan Zhan! You can't say these sorts of things, I don't- you always call me shameless, so who's the shameless one now?"

Lan Zhan's reply was quick and immediate. "Wei Ying."

"See! There you go again!"

Lan Zhan’s lips curved upwards slightly, and with a start, Wei Ying realised he was smiling.

“Lan Zhan...” he breathed. “No wonder you don’t smile much. You’re so beautiful when you smile.”

Wei Ying blinks, his head and meridians feeling curiously clear. The memory of Lan Zhan’s smile sits in the back of his mind, incandescent and bright. Wei Ying wanted to see that smile again.

He was in a warm bed, and the sun was high in the sky. He struggled to sit upright, and he realised it was the same room that Jiang Cheng had practically interrogated him in.

Suddenly, his body was made aware of his raging thirst and his uncomfortably full bladder. He groaned, reaching out of bed for the pitcher of water on the table. But his arm was asleep, and he fell out of bed in a tangle of limbs and sheets.

For a moment, he simply lay there, stunned by the force of the fall. Footsteps shook the floor, and the door was flung open.

"Wei Ying!" Sure, steady hands lifted him up, and a cool cup of water was pressed to his lips. He drank like a man possessed, the water like nectar on his tongue.

"Lan Zhan?"

"Wei Ying. Did you try to get out of bed?"

Lan Zhan looked... worried. The slight tilt to his mouth, and the way his eyes looked like smoked glass in the morning light... Suddenly, Wei Ying's throat felt dry for a completely different reason.

"I..."

"You should not." Lan Zhan helped Wei Ying back up to the bed, tucking the sheets around him before sitting on the edge of the bed. "Hua Chengzhu and Xie *daozhang* visited last night."

"They *what*?"

Annoyingly, no matter what Wei Ying said or did to try and wheedle more information out of Lan Zhan, he wouldn't say anything until Wei Ying had dressed and eaten, and even then, he didn't say anything until Jiang Cheng returned.

When Jiang Cheng returned, his eyebrow twitched when he saw Lan Zhan and Wei Ying sitting at the table. "You're still here."

"Lan Zhan made me stay, can you believe it? I have to talk to you and tell you something, he says. So don't start shouting and just listen to me first." Wei Ying rolled his eyes, spooning more congee into his mouth and reaching for the chilli oil.

Lan Zhan looked vaguely ill at the colour of his congee, which, okay, Wei Ying might have added a little too much spice to it, but come on. He felt cold! His legs were all numb and tingly, so he had to eat more chilli to warm up.

"So talk." Jiang Cheng sat opposite Wei Ying, wrinkling his nose at the bright red congee and opting for a few sticks of *youtiao* instead.

"We'll start easy. I died, and... after that, I'm not sure, but Hua Cheng took me in."

"Hua Cheng?" Jiang Cheng raised an eyebrow. "As in, Crimson Rain Sought Flower, that Hua Cheng? I thought he was a Ghost King."

"He is," Wei Ying nodded. "And the lord of Ghost City."

"How do you know all this?"

Wei Ying sighed. Jiang Cheng really shouldn't be asking these questions; he already knew the answers!

“I was there. My turn, what happened yesterday night? I saw shijie, and at first I thought it was a hallucination. But then you...unless it’s a double hallucination?”

Jiang Cheng snorted. “Dumbass. No, I saw *da-jie* too. She...talked to me, after you passed out. Just a little.”

“What did she say?”

“Things that don’t concern you, so stop asking.” Jiang Cheng reached for a cup of tea, but a Jiang disciple burst through the door, and he groaned. “Report.”

“Sect Leader! The Ghost General was spotted just outside this inn; our men have surrounded him.”

“Damn it! Send-”

“No, wait! I can deal with this!” Wei Ying jumped up from the table, his hand almost knocking over his congee and sending the dishes flying. “Let me try. Please.” He turned to Jiang Cheng imploringly.

A muscle worked in Jiang Cheng’s jaw, and he turned away. “Do what you must. But if I catch you doing something stupid-”

“I won’t, I won’t!” Wei Ying rushed out onto the streets, slowly approaching Wen Ning. The fierce corpse looked sincerely confused, turning this way and that. But he wasn’t attacking. That was a good sign.

“What did they do to you?” Wei Ying murmured, holding out his hand. Wen Ning obediently dropped his hand into Wei Ying’s, and he turned it around, inspecting it for any signs of tampering.

“What the hell is taking so long- oh my god!” Wen Ning immediately lunged at Jiang Cheng, who stumbled back, Zidian appearing in a flash. He slashed it outwards, but Wen Ning blocked the attack from hitting Wei Ying.

Goodness! Jiang Cheng seemed to always come at the most inopportune moments. Wei Ying pursed his lips, whistling sharply. Wen Ning jerked, jumping over the rooftops, and Wei Ying took this opportunity to escape.

He tried to find Wen Ning, but before he could, joyful barks sounded from behind him, and Wei Ying had broken into a dead sprint, heading for the nearest hiding spot—in this case, an abandoned courtyard.

“Go away! Go away!” He yelped, slamming the door shut on the barking and leaning heavily against the wood. Were talismans a little too much in this situation?

Suddenly, Wei Ying heard quiet scratches, and the barks suddenly seemed much louder. Hardly daring to believe his eyes, he glanced up at Fairy.

“What kind of dog can climb sheer walls? Get away! Shoo! Shoo! I don’t have any food for you!”

“Fairy!”

Wei Ying heaved a sigh of relief when Fairy ran past him, standing beside Jin Ling.

“Oh. Thank you.”

“Hmph! I can’t believe that you managed to give my uncle the slip. He still wanted to interrogate you, to the point of sending out people.”

“Do you know why?”

Jin Ling rolled his eyes. “Yeah. Because he thinks you’re Wei Wuxian.”

“Do you think I’m Wei Wuxian?”

Jin Ling snorts, and suddenly, Wei Ying could see Jiang Cheng in him. Definitely his nephew. “The infamous Yiling Patriarch wouldn’t be afraid of dogs. So no, I don’t believe you’re Wei Wuxian. In any case, you should go soon. My uncle doesn’t treat those who he suspects dabble in demonic cultivation.”

“Jin Ling! Before you go, let this master bestow some information on you. In life, there are two cringe phrases that you must say, no matter what. ‘Thank you’, and ‘I’m sorry’.” Wei Ying looked at the boy. He was so young. “So I’m sorry.”

“What?” Jin Ling looked confused.

“I’m sorry for what I said on Dafan Mountain. It was cruel of me, and my poor memory isn’t a good excuse.”

Jin Ling took a step back, and he huffed. “Whatever. It’s not like I haven’t heard it before, and you’re the first person to apologise.”

“So we’re even for that time?”

“No! I didn’t report you to my uncle this time, so you still owe me.” Jin Ling crossed his arms, but his face softened slightly. “You’re not all bad, Mo Xuanyu.”

After he left, Wei Ying turned to the spike of resentful energy that had been hovering nearby and whistled once. Wen Ning dropped into the courtyard, and Wei Ying wasted no time in a thorough examination of the fierce corpse.

“Gotcha,” he muttered when his fingers ran over two bumps in Wen Ning’s head, about one cun apart. He grabbed them and pulled, ignoring the twitches from Wen Ning and concentrating on repairing the damage done by the nails. Not too bad, but it would still impact Wen Ning.

“Let’s see what they’ve been up to, hm?” Wei Ying murmured, gathering the lingering resentful energy surrounding the nails and passing the memories through his head. He caught glimpses of a dark cave, of robes fluttering around his head, and then he saw him.

Jin Guangshan.

Wei Ying felt the corner of his lip curl up in a snarl, but his brain was already whirring with the possibilities. Jin Guangshan... so that meant that he lied at Nightless City. Of course he did.

“Y... Young master... Wei.”

“Long time no see, Wen Ning.” Wei Ying smiled, but that smile turned into shock when Wen Ning dropped into a kowtowing position.

“Sorry...for-”

“No need for that. Get up, come on. Didn’t I tell you not to kneel anymore?” But Wen Ning was obstinate, and finally, Wei Ying fell to his knees, knowing that Wen Ning would catch him. And he did.

“Young master Wei!” Wen Ning cried out, alarmed by this turn of events. “You can’t- you mustn’t-!”

“Well, it is more comfortable here anyway. So, let’s talk. Do you remember anything these past thirteen years? Do you remember how you escaped, at least?” Wei Ying settled under a tree. He had a feeling it was going to be a long talk.

Wen Ning frowned. “Some... not all. It is... blurry, young master Wei. Forgive me. But...”

“But?”

“But I remember... hearing your voice. And then I broke out. When you played Chengqing, I followed the sound.”

“I saw Jin Guangshan in the vision. There must have been a lot of trap arrays.”

Wen Ning blinked. “So you...”

“Someone must have let you out deliberately. The events are too coincidental; my resurrection, the arm, then your appearance...”

“Aiyo, there’s no need for apologies here. It’s not like you ran off to go get captured or anything.” Wei Ying tried to wave off Wen Ning’s concerns, but when he realised that his arm wouldn’t move, he glanced down at his arm.

Ah. How could he forget?

"Young master, your hand-!"

"Ah, it's nothing." Wei Ying smiled absently as he tugged his sleeve lower down. "Mo Xuanyu... his body is really weak. I miss my old body. Would you like me to tell you about these few years?"

"I...have heard some things. Burial Mound is...empty again. Sect Leader Jiang killed... killed you."

"Ah, don't blame Jiang Cheng. It was my destiny to die like that."

"Then, the Stygian Tiger Amulet..."

"You know me—" Wei Ying laughed breathlessly, leaning forward to whisper mischievously to Wen Ning. "—I'm too overconfident."

"Young master Wei!"

Oh. Hm. How did he get onto the floor? He should get up; it was dirty. But his body seemed content to lie down. There must be a reason.

"Hanguang-jun... can help, can't he?"

"Oh... Lan Zhan. Aiyo, don't bother him with a small-time ghost like me..." Wei Ying chuckled quietly.

Fainting so many times in just two days. What has the world come to? His arms... his arms weren't supposed to have silver words on them, were they?

His vision dimmed further, and he sighed as finally, his sight gave out. There, now it was dark. Quiet, too.

He could finally rest.

"-Ying! Wei Ying!"

Oh, even Lan Zhan was here. What a lovely dream.

Chapter End Notes

youtiao: fried dough that is usually paired with soya milk or porridge :D it's crispy and can be eaten savoury or sweet. There is a legend surrounding this food. Legend has it that there was once an official who did not listen to his advisors and thus, his advances were always unsuccessful.

The common people hated him, and a dough maker came up with the bright idea of shaping two pieces of dough into the official and his wife's shape, then deep fried it. The snack gained traction, and eventually became a common breakfast food or simply just a snack.

da-jie: big sister

-

I'm really sorry for Wei Ying fainting so many times in the episode, but he should know to take on a curse that operates on resentful energy WHEN HE LITERALLY IS DYING FROM USING RESENTFUL ENERGY- anyway, I was thinking of making a tgcg, mdzs and svsss crossover, but I genuinely do not know how that would go about. Most likely, I'll use 'Hard Reset' as a testing ground for this holy trinity, but be warned that I don't tend to headhop in my fics very often. I only change perspectives for a breath of fresh air, or if one of the main characters can't have their viewpoint recorded.

Chapter 19

Chapter Summary

Hey! I ended this chapter on a soft note, I hope you like it~ We're nearing the Yi City arc now, which I am absolutely itching for >:D

Also, you know that makeout scene? You know, the one with the bathtub? Yeah, I'm working that in. I have about five hundred words for that thing written up already, and I'm relying on the audio drama for this one lads.

Also, Nie Huaisang is incredibly fun to write; I genuinely enjoyed his parts and how his placid nature comes across in his actions and words.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

His dreams were dark and cold, plagued by blood red eyes and whispered words. His skin crawled with the feeling of being watched and judged, and even though he had never shied away from the limelight, right now he wanted nothing more than to disappear.

But through the darkness, a single silver butterfly drifted towards him, alighting on the ground around him. More and more joined it, until the ground was a sea of shimmering light, and Wei Ying felt like he could relax.

The darkness was gone.

Warmth flowed through his veins, flushing out the cold and replacing it with a gentle, soothing warmth, like the summer heat tempered with a wisp of spring's chill.

The cold was gone.

A bell chimed, and for a single instant, the voices dimmed, and Wei Ying breathed a sigh of relief. It chimed again and again, drowning out the voices and highlighting one voice in particular.

“Wei Ying!”

The voices were gone, and Wei Ying was left floating in a syrupy, golden daze. When he opened his eyes, he felt as though he had slept for a thousand years.

“Wh- what?” He croaked.

“The curse on you has been suppressed by Hua Chengzhu’s spell and the Clarity Bell.” Lan Zhan put down the bell, and the slight jingle reminded Wei Ying of that dream that he had. So those butterflies...that bell... That left only one thing.

“Did you transfer spiritual energy to me?” Wei Ying asked, and promptly cracked up when he saw Lan Zhan look away, withdrawing his hand from Wei Ying’s wrist. “Lan Zhan! Did you know, I had a strange dream?”

“Mn. Eat first.” Lan Zhan led Wei Ying over to the table, and Wei Ying gaped at the food.

“These are all vegetarian! And no wine? Lan Zhan...” Wei Ying whined, watching as Lan Zhan spooned vegetables and poured tea for the both of them.

“You have just recovered from a curse, and you are weak to resentful energy. Eating milder foods is in your best interest.” Lan Zhan placed a piece of braised cucumber into Wei Ying’s bowl. “Do not talk while eating.”

“Alright, alright.” Wei Ying huffed good naturedly. Despite the food being strictly vegetarian, Wei Ying wolfed it down while bemoaning the lack of meat. Lan Zhan did ask for meat buns later, much to the delight of Wei Ying. So he did care after all!

“What did you dream about?”

“The past. Uh, my past life. I don’t know, it’s blurry. But I saw an array up top of Nightless City. I didn’t know the sects used arrays in that fight, I-”

“They did not.”

Wei Ying froze. “What?”

"None of the sects used arrays in that fight. None of us expected a fight; there was no reason to bring a large scale array."

"So that means..."

“Someone set you up.” Lan Zhan confirmed.

Wei Ying picked up a handful of peanuts, trying to replicate the array that he had seen. It was rough, but he had to guess some of the sigils drawn. The talismans for that array must have been hidden around Nightless City, and he wet a chopstick in oil before sketching out the array, using the peanuts as anchor points.

“This is what I remembered.” Wei Ying muttered as the mock array took shape. “Soul Summoning array, but why...?”

“The Stygian Tiger Amulet. Too much resentful energy will make the user lose their mind.” Lan Zhan looked at him evenly. “Do you remember?”

Wei Ying laughed, the short, sharp sound grating harshly on his ears. “No. To be honest, my last few weeks of my life were a fugue; I barely remembered a lot of things.”

“A few weeks?”

“Yeah, it’s-” Wei Ying froze, the situation clicking into place. “Oh. Oh, I see what you mean, Lan Zhan. That time, at Qiongqi Road- oh, I see. I was set up.”

“It is not your fault,” Lan Zhan said gently. “The situation was beyond your control.”

Wei Ying gets up, pacing around the room, but he stops when he hears quiet shuffling.

“Who’s there!?” Wei Ying shouted, gesturing at Lan Zhan to ready himself. The door burst open, and a familiar figure tumbled into the room, already shouting apologies.

“Ahh, I don’t know, I really don’t know!” Nie Huaisang looked distraught, his eyes flickering from side to side. It landed on Wei Ying’s face, then on Lan Zhan’s face. Recognition stirred, and Huaisang scrambled to his feet, dusting off his robes and reaching for his fan—which was conspicuously absent—before dipping into a bow.

“Hanguang-jun. And...?”

“Mo Xuanyu.” Wei Ying volunteered. “At your service, young master Nie. Were you eavesdropping? That’s against the Gusu Lan rules, you know.”

“Yes, yes,” Huaisang murmured, wringing his hands. “But I wasn’t following you two. When I arrived, a dog attacked me, so it really wasn’t me.”

Lan Zhan stepped forward, placing down a paper fan. “Young master Nie, I think this belongs to you.”

“My fan! I was worried I’d never get it back again. Where did you find this?” Huaisang picks up the fan and snaps it open, fanning himself with it.

“Near the Man-eating Castle.”

The fan stops. Huaisang’s smile seemed frozen on his face, and Wei Ying could see his brain moving, trying to calculate excuses already.

“Lying is forbidden.” Lan Zhan narrowed his eyes, and suddenly, Wei Ying felt like the room was a little too small. “Tell the truth.”

“I... I only followed the two of you there. Really! I don’t know about anything else.”

“So you say you don’t know anything. That’s fine. I know, so just listen to me, okay?” Wei Ying lifted the teapot and poured himself a cup of tea. “I heard that anyone who goes near the Man-eating Castle will be well- eaten, but if no one makes it back alive, then how do we know that the people are being eaten? Obviously, the story is made up.”

The smile that Huaisang has on was a thin, fragile thing. “Ah, young master Mo... you really are quite perceptive.”

“I do my best. Now, that maze array is very powerful. Only a spiritual animal who can track scents, or a powerful man like Hanguang-jun can break through. The castle has no doors and windows, and there was a strong barrier in place. Without powerful magical weapons, it would be difficult to access this castle.”

Wei Wuxian picked up the empty cup and strolled around the room, piecing together the puzzle as he went. “The array, the barrier, the stories, all these are meant to keep people away from a building filled with sabres and corpses. Now, you can explain everything here, or you can explain after this information is leaked, young master Nie. Which will it be?”

“Hanguang-jun. Young master Mo. What I’m about to say... could you swear to keep this silent?”

“You have my word.”

“Listen to Hanguang-jun! We won’t tell anyone; we’re just interested in it, that’s all.”

Huaisang reached out for a cup of tea and drank it, slamming the cup down on the table. “The Man-eating Castle isn’t actually a castle at all. It’s the Nie’s family tomb.”

After a bit of badgering, Nie Huaisang had finally decided to tell them the full story—on the condition that they would not breathe a single word of this to others, of course. Because—

“The Nie Clan is already getting away with this on a technicality,” Huaisang fluttered his fan nervously. “This will just complicate things, and I really don’t know...”

—Huaisang was the infamous headshaker, after all. He probably wanted as little fuss as possible during his reign, Wei Ying reasoned.

“You bury swords instead of bodies?” Wei Ying raised an eyebrow. Strange traditions.

“It’s a nod to our ancestor, young master Mo.” Huaisang glanced curiously at Lan Zhan, but when the latter stared impassively, the former hastened to finish his explanation. “Our ancestor was a butcher, so we cultivate using sabres which hold the fierce spirit of an animal.”

“The bodies, then?” Wei Ying prompted.

“They... are to keep the sabre spirits in check.” Huaisang glanced around nervously before continuing. “After death, the spirits will continue to rampage, if not handled correctly. The corpses and the swords keep each other battling, so neither will be able to leave.”

Wei Ying and Lan Zhan exchange a glance. That explained the spirits who didn’t know where they were.

“There was an incident about ten years ago. Grave robbers somehow got it into their heads that this was the grave of enlightened men, and tried to break in. What happened was bizarre. Dozens of people just vanished into thin air!”

“Vanished? Please.” Wei Ying patted Huaisang on the back. “They upset the balance between sword and corpse, didn’t they? That means that they became the replacements for the corpses.”

“Young master Mo... you do know a lot of things.”

Wei Ying tactfully ignored this comment and moved forward to Lan Zhan’s side, examining the unconscious bodies.

“So the story of a man eating castle, did you pass it around?”

“Ah, no! This was the work of the villagers, though I just... encouraged it a little. To keep people away. But... everything is sealed inside the castle, but the bloodstains were all outside.”

Oh. Wei Ying turned to the scene before him.

“What’s wrong-” Huaisang let out a little gasp, staggering back at the sight of so many bodies. “It’s... it’s just like ten years ago. And those... those are the robes of my clansman. I sent them to fetch new bodies and seal the castle, I don’t... I don’t know.”

A rustle, and men dropped down from the trees around them. Plain dark robes, nondescript swords and cloths covering their lower faces.

An ambush.

“Are these the people from Huaicang Mountain?”

“Possible.”

“Lan Zhan, you go deal with the castle. I’ll clear these people.” Wei Ying caught Lan Zhan’s eye and heaved an exasperated sigh. “Aiyo, I promise I won’t use resentful energy. There, happy?”

“Mn.”

Wei Ying watched Lan Zhan enter the room and immediately called up the resentful energy around the area, creating a barrier with it. They would need to get through him before they could touch Lan Zhan.

“Although this flute is not as good, it’s enough to deal with you schmucks.” Wei Ying draws resentful energy from the air, sketching a quick sigil and watching as it explodes outwards, blasting all of the men away.

Amateurs.

“Ahh!! Someone help me, please!”

Huaisang? Wei Ying whipped his head around, calculating the distance between him and Huaisang. No, those swords were too close to him, Wei Ying would never reach in time-

Another sword sliced through the air, blocking all of the swords.

Wei Ying turned to the owner of the sword and groaned inwardly.

Lan Xichen and Jin Guangyao.

Great. Just great.

“Huaisang? What happened?” Jin Guangyao stepped forward to lift Huaisang to his feet.

“This... this time, I really, really don’t know!”

Wei Ying made eye contact with Jin Guangyao, and he saw a flicker of recognition in those dark eyes. Jin Guangyao recognised Mo Xuanyu? Oh dear.

The sound of a swordfight pulled Wei Ying in, and he glanced at the entrance to the tomb.

“Lan Zhan!”

Lan Zhan was holding his own in the swordfight, but it seemed like the person knew Gusu’s fighting techniques, and Lan Zhan couldn’t pull any surprises.

There was a concentrated blast of spiritual energy, and a pained grunt. No sooner had they fallen back then did they lift their swords in some sort of unspoken cue.

An array.

Wei Ying almost stepped forward, but Lan Zhan was quicker: he unwrapped his guqin and played a note that made the very air tremble with spiritual energy. The men went flying, and Wei Ying suppressed a cheer.

But something else caught his eye.

Scabs on one of the men’s chests. Scabs that looked eerily similar to the Hundred Holes curse. But why...

A sharp, almost sweet pain interrupted him from his thoughts, and he saw the tiny silver characters spinning around his ankle.

“What the hell?” Wei Ying muttered. “It was sealed!” He looked up, registering the surge of resentful energy. It was the arm. And the curse had acted up, which meant that the two were connected.

Lan Zhan was already plucking at his guqin, sealing the arm yet again. It twisted grotesquely before pointing, back in the direction of the castle.

Lan Zhan had exchanged a few words with Lan Xichen, who had helped search for a left arm missing from the corpses. Huaisang was fretting over the state of the tomb and the corpses, leaving Wei Ying to puzzle this question silently.

“These were all the bodies. When I went in, the men in black were digging too.”

“Huh. So it is the correct place. So then-” Wei Ying met Lan Zhan’s eyes, and he could see that the cultivator had figured it out too.

“My apologies.” Lan Zhan drew his sword, cutting away the rotting clothing and revealing the secret: stitched up legs.

Having found the body, Wei Ying moved away, and Lan Xichen approached him.

“I heard that Wangji has suppressed the curse on your body. If you take this pill, the effects should be gone within half a month.”

“Oh! This one thanks you for your kindness, Sect leader Lan.” Wei Ying pocketed the qiankun pouch. He didn’t have the heart to tell Lan Xichen that the cause of this curse was, well, him.

Lan Zhan soon joined him, and the conversation diverted to the perpetrator.

“What will you do?”

“Investigate. Capture, if possible.”

Lan Xichen nodded. “The person who did this is vicious and dangerous. They must be apprehended as soon as possible.”

“Hanguang-jun. This mission is highly dangerous. Please allow me to send some men with you.”

Oh, by the ten circles of hell, this was not going to be good. Wei Ying had had more resentful induced fainting spells lately, and having Lan Zhan tenderly call his name in front of others is not on his to-do list.

At least, not now...

“There is no need. If I run into any trouble, I will seek help from the watchtower.”

Wei Ying whipped his head to Lan Zhan, who remained entirely focused on Jin Guangyao. Ah, of course the famous Hanguang-jun would work alone.

“That’s fine.” Then, horrors upon horrors, Jin Guangyao turned to Wei Ying. “Xuanyu, I heard you were practising the dark arts. Although it is unacceptable by the masses, as long as you have a good heart, it’s fine. Just follow Hanguang-jun and learn.”

Okay, so Jin Guangyao was close. Better not speak too much, then. He might give up the game too early.

“We have to get going now.” The gaze Lan Xichen gave Jin Guangyao seemed soft and familiar. Something was going on between those two, but Wei Ying had to run to catch up with Lan Zhan, so he didn’t look too deep into that.

Besides, he had more interesting things to puzzle over. Like the fact that the person duelling Lan Zhan had cast a spell to hide his sword, and was overly familiar with the Gusu Lan sword techniques.

“Lan Zhan, do you know this man?”

“No.”

“Ugh, that makes it worse. When I searched Wen Ning’s memories, I caught glimpses of a man from Gusu Lan too, beside Jin Guangshan. Any ideas, Lan Zhan?”

“No.”

“Ahh, I have far too many enemies for this. Maybe if I hadn’t been so arrogant... I didn’t even listen to your words.” Wei Ying laughed, loud and self-deprecating. “That’s how I was set up so easily. Oh, how stupid-”

“Incorrect.”

“Huh?” Wei Ying blinked, only now realising that Lan Zhan was standing in front of him, practically towering over him.

“Wei Ying is not stupid. Nor is he arrogant. Wei Ying is Wei Ying.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Wei Ying chortled, but his laughter died down when he saw Lan Zhan staring at him, completely serious.

“Promise me.”

“What?”

“Promise me that Wei Ying will not... put himself down like this. Wei Ying is wonderful.”

All the jokes that Wei Ying was about to make evaporated from his throat. How could he, when Lan Zhan was right there? Beautiful, powerful Lan Zhan, who *cared* for him, of all people. He was just some wash up, so *why*-

“Wei Ying.” That soft voice broke him out of his thoughts again. Ah, he really deserved the title of Hanguang-jun. Lan Zhan was Wei Ying’s lantern on the single plank route into the stifling darkness.

“Promise me.”

Suddenly, Wei Ying was thankful for the cover of night. Lan Zhan could be so brutally honest at times, but in times like these, when he started to go down that rabbit hole, Lan Zhan would always be there, his soothing presence grounding him.

His heart did a funny little flop.

“Okay,” he whispered. “I promise.”

Chapter End Notes

I truly believe that LWJ wouldn't stand by as WWX just... tears into himself. WWX is someone who is self-deprecating, from what I can tell. He would rather die than blame his family, and I see LWJ coaxing him out of this habit.

Secondly! I have plans for Hard Reset, big plans! Some scenes have been plotted already, but it's mostly just snippets and ideas still. What else, what else....oh!

I have another fic dropping! It's short, just one chapter, and it's from an idea I once used for another fic (on tumblr)! It's called 'You're my Sunflower', and it's from Lan Zhan's POV. It should be short, maybe around 1k to 2k words? This is practice for Hard Reset, so be sure to check it out when it drops :D

Chapter 20

Chapter Summary

Hi hi! I should have been doing this before, honestly, but if you're reading this fic when it's completed, do remember to take a break now! Drink some water, eat something, let your eyes rest before continuing! If you read this fic in one go, you just read about 45k words, so take it easy, comrade! We're starting a new arc soon, so rest well and buckle up >:D

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Back in their room—and wasn't that a funny thought? Their room— Wei Ying and Lan Zhan played Inquiry together again, and the arm points them west. Towards Qinghe.

News of the man eating castle travelled fast, and Wei Ying pricks his ears up when he hears a group of people talking about the Jin clan and the Lan clan sending people over. His grin soured slightly when he heard one of them wonder if the Yiling Patriarch was back, but ah, what could he do?

He was used to this, so it only twinged slightly. Lan Zhan, on the other hand, looked ready to kill.

His gaze was sharp and pointed, and Wei Ying felt his chest go fuzzy at that. Lan Zhan did care. Everything that Lan Zhan did for Wei Ying felt like a nail being hammered in—no, not in his coffin.

It was like he had been given puzzle pieces, but he couldn't see the big picture yet. It should frustrate him, but Wei Ying felt calm. The picture would reveal itself when the time was right.

So he just laid a hand on Lan Zhan's shoulder and called him back. "Lan Zhan. It's okay."

"Wei Ying. There is something that I do not understand."

"Oh~? The famous Hanguang-jun is seeking this lowly disciple's knowledge? Very well then! Ask away, Lan Zhan."

"Everyone says that you were devoured by your corpse army. I checked the burial mounds, and confirmed its falsehood."

Wei Ying couldn't respond for a moment. Lan Zhan...went back to the Burial Mounds? What for? To make sure that he wasn't cultivating a body in pools of blood? He was probably sent

back to make sure that Wei Ying hadn't come back to life.

Still, a small part of him wishes that Lan Zhan made the trip without being told to by anyone.

"I died. It doesn't matter how I died, right?"

Lan Zhan inhaled sharply. "Wei Ying..."

Wei Ying didn't look back at Lan Zhan's horrified gasp, instead choosing to rush over to a stall selling all sorts of toys for children.

"I don't know why, but I really like these rattle drums. Lan Zhan, buy one for me, please?" Wei Ying said, half jokingly.

He did not expect Lan Zhan to smile—smile! Goodness, the world was truly ending now—and nod.

"Mn."

"Good grief, the feng shui here is terrible!" Wei Ying glanced around, rubbing his hands along his arms to generate some warmth.

"It is barren land." Lan Zhan responded, reaching out and pressing a gentle wisp of spiritual energy to his wrist, and the raging chill calmed down.

"Still..." Wei Ying didn't like this. It was like the whole canyon was holding its breath, waiting for something to happen. Or something had already happened, and they were merely unwelcome visitors on a site of mourning.

"Wei Ying," Lan Zhan murmured, and he traced his hand along a deep cut in the stone.

"Sword marks."

The resentful energy here was stagnant, but a quick prod sent it spiralling into action, and Wei Ying pushed them outwards, slicing through the knee length grass and scattering the crows.

A trail of blood greeted them, and they followed it slowly, tracing the rusty brown patches until it stopped at a half crumbled stone. The blood was crusted over the sign and weather had smoothed the stone over, but it was still legible.

"Well, Yi City is dead ahead." Wei Ying looked up, peering through the layer of fog that blanketed the whole city. "Strange weather."

"Be careful."

"Aiya, Lan Zhan. You know me, I can handle myself in a fight." Wei Ying laughed, his voice bouncing through the empty streets and fading away.

Paper money was scattered in the streets, and Wei Ying recalled one of the facts that the man who pointed them this way had told them: the profession here was usually related to funerals. Most of the citizens were either dead or died young.

“How do you think that the juniors are faring by themselves?” Wei Ying wondered. “Don't tell Jin Ling, but I'm starting to miss them a little, Lan Zhan. They were like little ducklings, following you around.”

“-Sizhui!”

Wei Ying cocked his head to the side. “Huh. Did you hear that, Lan Zhan? It sounded like- oh my god, Jin Ling!”

The boy tumbled out from the sky, apparently having lost control over his sword. Lan Zhan thrust his hand out, arresting Jin Ling's momentum and dropping him gently on the ground.

“Hanguang-jun! And- ugh, why do I keep seeing you around?” Jin Ling got up, snatching his sword from Wei Ying's hands.

“We came here because a nice man was willing to point me in the direction of a few wayward disciples. How did you fall out of the sky, anyway?”

“You try riding around in that demonic miasma and see if you can keep your balance!” Jin Ling snapped back, crossing his arms. “Forget riding a sword, I can barely find anyone in this fog!”

“So why are you here?” Wei Ying asked.

“We were out night hunting, and when I got back, there was a dead cat nailed to my door.” Jin Ling wrinkled his nose at the memory. “My investigations led me here, and I met Sizhui and Jingyi on the way here. Apparently they got the same thing happening to them too.”

“Oh. So where are they now?”

“Don't know. When we entered, we were immediately separated.”

“Lan-” Wei Ying stopped, his ears picking up the sound of footsteps. Light, fleet and almost soundless. Lan Zhan plucked one of the paper money circles from the air and infused it with spiritual energy, sending it towards the sound of the footsteps. Jin Ling rushed to check the... thing they struck down, but Wei Ying was more preoccupied with what was in front of them.

“Ah. An abandoned city is incomplete without corpses!” Wei Ying prepared to reach out for resentful energy, but Lan Zhan caught his hand, his eyes wide.

“Wei *Ying* .”

“This is just a paper doll!” Jin Ling stomped over, but he caught sight of the shambling corpse. “Corpses!” Without another thought, Jin Ling unsheathed his sword and plunged into the mist.

“Ah, wait a minute Jin Ling! Jin Ling!” Wei Ying sighed in frustration, rushing into the mist himself to look for that headstrong boy. A golden blur flew into Wei Ying’s chest, and he braced himself against the explosive force behind it.

Wei Ying heard the familiar scrape of Bicheng being unsheathed and reached out, pressing the sword back into its sheath. “Ah, Lan Zhan. Can I take this one?”

Lan Zhan looked at him for a long moment, as though scrutinising his body for any signs of the curse. Finally, he sheathed his sword and nodded. “Mn.”

He raised his flute to his lips and played, watching the corpses closely. There wasn’t even a twitch in their muscles, and Wei Ying had to duck to avoid a swipe from one of the zombies.

“I can’t control them!” Wei Ying shouted, slamming his flute into the neck of one of the zombies and watching it fall.

And Lan Zhan was there, a powerful note ringing through the air and slamming into the corpses, dispelling the resentful energy clinging to them. Wei Ying set down Jin Ling to take a closer look at the bodies, prodding at them with his flute.

They were dead, of course, but something about them bugged him. Some of them were mutilated, their eyes or tongue missing.

“These corpses are different. I couldn’t control them at all.” Wei Ying lifted one of the corpses’ clothes, and a seal slipped out.

“These cannot be defeated by conventional means.” Lan Zhan stood beside Jin Ling, his hand resting on the hilt of his sword.

“Chang... the Chang clan of Liyang? Chang Ping?” What were they doing all the way here?

Lan Zhan already knew what Wei Ying required of him, so it seemed. His guqin was already out, and the now familiar opening notes for Inquiry were played.

It was a flashback this time too, at Golden Carp Tower.

Wei Ying looked over at the four people gathered in the hall. One of them was from the Chang family, as seen from the seal that hung from his belt. Xiao Xingchen was there too. The other two were unfamiliar to him.

“Xiao Xingchen could be considered my martial uncle, right? But who’s that beside him?”

“Song Zichen, from Baixue Temple.”

“Xue Yang has committed heinous crimes, but why do you shelter him, Sect leader Jin?”

“Protecting Xue Yang? He must have a motive for that; the Jin sect won’t risk their standing in the cultivation world for a criminal.”

“Could it be that the rumours are true? That in the first siege of the Burial Mounds, that malicious item wasn’t destroyed?” Xiao Xingchen stepped forward. “The pieces are all in the hands of the Jin clan now, and this man is capable of restoring the amulet.”

Wei Ying did a double take. Impossible. He had made sure that the Stygian Tiger Amulet would be beyond repair, unless...no, it was possible, but it would never be as strong as the original. Still, it was enough power to be coveted.

“Lies and slander! All of those rumours were spread to debase and defame my clan. Such accusations are-”

“Then why do you allow such a despicable man to live?” Nie Mingjue stalks in, his sabre practically rattling with killing intent. But it wasn’t like E’ming; this sabre just wanted to kill.

“Sect leader Nie.” Jin Guangshan leaned forward.

“If Sect leader Jin can’t do it, I’ll dispose of this trash myself!”

“Da-ge!” That frantic shout stopped Nie Mingjue’s blade just as it dug into Xue Yang’s throat. Xue Yang did not move throughout the ordeal.

Wei Ying whistled at the control that Nie Mingjue had over his sabre. Such a shame that he died young; he had been one of the most capable cultivators out there.

“Da-ge, please don’t be hasty. Let Sect leader Jin-”

“Get your hands off me!”

“Sect leader Nie! Please calm down. The Jin clan of Lanling Jin will deal with this situation and issue an explanation; on this, you have my word. Guards, escort this man to the dungeons.”

Xue Yang was hauled to his feet, and when he passed Xiao Xingchen, he leaned in, almost intimately close.

“Xiao dao Zhang. Don’t forget about me. We’ll meet again.”

The vision faded to another scene; a manor engulfed in green flames, bodies strewn everywhere and screams ringing in the night.

They didn’t see who killed him, but the utter fear on Chang Ping’s face was enough to hazard a guess. That, and the sword: Shuanghua.

“So Chang Ping did die by Shuanghua’s blade. Lan Zhan, what do you think?”

“One should not judge—”

“—before knowing the full truth. I knew you’d say that. Xiao Xingchen doesn’t seem to be a cruel man, I don’t think he’d have killed off an entire family. But the fact remains that they died by Shuanghua’s blade.”

“Their souls are fractured. I cannot play Inquiry to ask any more questions.”

“There are so few people involved in this. Xue Yang’s dead, but Xiao Xingchen and Song Zichen are still viable sources of information, right?”

“Song Zichen was poisoned by Xue Yang and lost his sight. Xiao Xingchen sacrificed his sight for him and has disappeared since then. Song Zichen left to search for Xiao Xingchen. Neither of them have responded to Evocation; we don’t know if they’re dead or alive.”

“Xiao Xingchen disappeared? When was that?”

“Eleven years ago.”

“Does anyone else know the Frostfall technique?”

“No. It was unique to Xiao Xingchen only.”

Wei Ying pressed a thumb to one of the corpses’ foreheads, checking the residual flow of resentful energy.

“These have only been dead for about nine years, maximum.”

“Xiao Xingchen was still alive, then.”

“The nailing of cats to doors is incredibly similar to the incidents in Mo village. There’s something we’re not seeing, Lan Zhan—Lan Zhan?” Wei Ying spun around wildly, looking for the comforting glimpse of white. Somehow, when he hadn’t been paying attention, the mist had turned blood red, and Wei Ying cursed the mist for providing endless shadows.

A figure moved, and Wei Ying turned, Jin Ling’s name on his lips. But the figure that bolted past him wore all white, and for a ridiculous moment, Wei Ying wondered if Lan Zhan was attacking him.

But no, the footwork of the man was too flighty, and his sword had an aura of cold around it. Wei Ying squinted at the man, watching as he cut down corpse after corpse, ignoring the most likely noxious gas that flooded from the corpses when they were cut up.

Those steps... the mark on the bodies as they fell...

Xiao Xingchen? What was he doing here?

Chapter End Notes

That bathtub scene was more explicit than I remember, and I'm debating... I don't know. Should I keep it in? Like, the original one, from the novel.

Chapter 21

Chapter Summary

And we've left off on a cliffhanger! Sorry fellas, but I have something big planned for Yi City! Well, second biggest. The biggest would be the Second Burial Siege, because that is my favourite arc of all times (possibly because Wei Ying could not catch a break). I have many thoughts for that, but the Yi City will most likely remain faithful to the donghua.

Again, I am still shocked that I've written 50k words in about 21 days, but I have a sneaking suspicion that I double posted for one day. My document has already expanded to about 55k words, so you know things are getting serious, hehe...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Wei Ying brought his flute to his lips when he saw Xiao Xingchen stumble, calling on the resentful energy again. It responded easily enough, and he moulded it to lash outwards, cutting through the corpses like they were nothing but paper dolls and collecting the poison gas so that it wouldn't spread outwards.

Jin Ling was still unconscious, so Wei Ying hooked his arms under Jin Ling's legs and lifted the boy, ignoring the way his limbs groaned in protest.

"It's not safe here. The poison is thinner higher up, we should get going." He called to Xiao Xingchen, who's head jerked towards him. Nevertheless, he sheathed his sword and followed Wei Ying, and together, they hopped over the rooftops, avoiding the crowds of corpses who had gathered on the streets.

"Using demonic cultivation to suppress demonic entities. What a clever method."

"Looks like you're familiar with demonic cultivation, hm?" Wei Ying smiled when Xiao Xingchen stiffened behind him.

"I've read about it. But I've heard of the repercussions of demonic cultivation. Even the founder of that cultivation, Wei Wuxian, was not spared."

"You lunatic, you-!" Jin Ling wriggled in Wei Ying's grasp before slapping him soundly, causing Wei Ying to loosen his grasp. Jin Ling stumbled on the smooth tiles, his sword falling from his clumsy fingers and him following soon after, unused to the sudden change in environment.

Wei Ying jumped down after Jin Ling, holding the boy closer to his chest and reaching out for the sword, catching both before they grievously injured themselves. But alas, Jin Ling was not a grateful child.

“Let go of me!”

“Stop messing around, Jin Ling. If your corpse poisoning gets any more serious, even the gods can’t save you anymore.” Wei Ying rolled his eyes, tossing Jin Ling his sword.

“Why do you care?”

Xiao Xingchen landed in the courtyard, swaying slightly on his feet. His coughs were rougher now, and Wei Ying moved to block the sword from Jin Ling’s view.

“Shuang-”

“Shhh. Keep quiet.”

“Ugh... I told you not to touch me.”

Wei Ying stuck his tongue out at Jin Ling before turning to Xiao Xingchen. “You’ve been badly infected, and you should circulate your qi around to cleanse your body; or at the very least, slow the infection.”

“There’s no time. These corpses will hound the living. Their numbers are endless and vast.”

“You seem to know a lot about Yi City.”

“I just happened to pass by for a night hunt.” The groans of the undead were steadily getting louder, and Xiao Xingchen stood up unsteadily. “Heed my advice, and leave now. You have a young one with you, and he takes priority.”

Wei Ying narrowed his eyes. What a self-sacrificial person. It almost reminded him of...well, he didn’t know exactly, but he felt like this feeling was supposed to be familiar to him.

“What about you?”

“I thought I should get rid of as many corpses as possible before the poison turns me into one of them.”

“Hmph. Who cares how many corpses there are? We just have to clear out all of them.” Jin Ling drew his sword and rushed to the door, but the sound of Lan Zhan’s guqin rang out, and the snarling of the corpses noticeably quietened.

The courtyard shook, small stones becoming dislodged and falling to the ground, and Wei Ying could almost feel the spiritual energy shaking the building.

In the silent wake of destruction, all of them heard it.

The sound of a cane, tapping against the ground. It paused for a moment before starting again, slowly fading into the distance. The telltale sound of a blade leaving its sheath followed, and Wei Ying deduced that Lan Zhan must be trying to hunt down the source of the tapping.

But it never seemed to get closer or farther, merely tapping towards a specific location. A low rumble followed soon after, and Wei Ying peeked out of the courtyard. He frowned when he saw the corpses flooding onto the streets again, and he knelt down, pulling out talisman paper and biting on his thumb, making a few amendments to the shield arrays he'd drawn beforehand.

He sent two towards the splintering door, watching as a dull red glow spread outwards, using the courtyard as an anchoring point and sealing them in.

“Jin Ling. Don't act rashly.”

Xiao Xingchen stepped forward, and Wei Ying guessed that he had sensed the spike in resentful energy. “I didn't expect you to be so skilled in demonic cultivation.”

“You think too highly of me, *daozhang*.” Wei Ying made to move forward, but he heard footsteps, and he glanced upwards. A man—no, a corpse—running towards them, his sword unsheathed. His arrays wouldn't hold against corpses of that calibre, and before he could open a small gap for the corpse, he shattered the array, aiming straight for Wei Ying's neck.

A white flash shot in front of him, and Xiao Xingchen blocked the blow, twisting his blade so it would send his opponent veering off to the side. But the poisoning must have been more potent than Wei Ying had gauged, because that one blow was enough to bring Xiao Xingchen onto his knees, blood splattering onto the dusty floor.

So that left Wei Ying to his own devices, and he blocked the sword strikes as best as he could. There was none of the clumsiness that came with regular corpses, and a nagging suspicion began to form. The man's sword forms must have been impeccable when he was still alive, but now, Wei Ying could get up close and send a stream of resentful energy to the corpse's mind, binding it down.

But just as he thought, the corpse broke free of the bindings relatively easily. So there was someone controlling this corpse.

Wei Ying backed up, finding a few paper dolls nearby, most likely maids for a funeral, judging from the painted faces and the brightly coloured clothing. An idea popped into his head. He used some of his blood and painted on eyes for both the dolls and bowed deeply to both of them, all while chanting, “Eyes behind thy long lashes, lips parted and smiling in tease. Mind not the good or the evil, with smeared eyes I summon thee.”

With a quiet rustling sound, the two dolls stood up, looking as flimsy as, well, paper.

“Take him down.”

The dolls shot into action, restraining the fierce corpse while Wei Ying laid out the barrier for the array in his mind, preparing to cast the spell. There was a tense moment when the array strained against the fierce corpse's struggles, but it soon quietened, and the uncomfortable chill in Wei Ying's chest dissipated.

He approached the body, brushing aside the hair. Two points glittered on the corpse's neck, and Wei Ying hummed to himself, satisfied with his discoveries. Nails, just like the ones that he had pulled out of Wen Ning.

"His tongue! It's... it's gone." Wei Ying looked down, and sure enough, when the corpse opened his mouth to snarl, only a tiny stub of flesh remained.

"Mn. And I got the feeling, like I've seen this man before." Wei Ying thought to the flashback that Inquiry had pulled out of Chang Ping. Back then, standing beside Xiao Xingchen...

"Song Zichen? Didn't he leave to look for Xiao Xingchen? He was such a highly skilled cultivator, and now..."

Wei Ying could understand what Jin Ling was trying to hint at. Song Zichen had a promising future ahead of him, but now, he was a mute fierce corpse, his consciousness suppressed and trussed up like a chicken going into the oven.

It was a wretched fate, even by Wei Ying's standards, and he'd seen his fair share of wretched fates.

"Who could've killed him?"

Wei Ying turned Song Zichen over, pulling aside his robes to reveal the now familiar Mark of Frost. Jin Ling stepped back, casting a nervous look at Xiao Xingchen leaning against a tree.

He seemed to be unconscious, so Wei Ying started speaking quietly and quickly.

"Only Xiao Xingchen can wield the Frost Fall technique, so this is definitely not faked. We're missing a motive as to why someone would kill their close friend. But what I'm interested in is how does the person who created these nails fit into the narrative."

Wei Ying pressed into the memories, digging through the most recent ones, the ones that were fogged over with mist.

Song Zichen seemed to be in a cave of some sort, chained to the wall. Footsteps approached him, and the man snapped his fingers, and the connection was cut off.

Too late, he heard the snap echo and ripple through time, until it rang out in the present as well. Song Zichen snarls and shrugs the paper restraints off, the array overloading with resentful energy.

"Wen Ning!" The name left his lips before Wei Ying could swallow it, and long, thick chains snaked around Song Zichen, hurling him away from Wei Ying, but not before his whisk

struck Wei Ying square across the chest.

“Young master-”

“Forget about me, take down Song Zichen! Take the fight outside, but don’t maim him seriously.” Wei Ying shouted, painfully aware of Jin Ling next to him. He could not reveal himself yet. Not like this. Their relationship was still new and fragile, and as much as he dearly wanted to be called Wei *qianbei*, he would have to settle for Mo *qianbei*.

“Impressive.”

Wei Ying turned towards Jin Ling, a warning on his lips, but it was too late. A small green orb smashed against the back of his neck, and Jin Ling’s eyes rolled up in his head.

“Aren’t I nice? I suppose you still haven’t revealed your identity yet, right?” Xiao Xingchen had completely changed his demeanour, and Wei Ying turned to him, clenching his fist around Chengqing.

“Taking out a fierce corpse with a low level summoning spell... I admire you, Wei Wuxian.” The man bowed, a small smile playing at the edge of his lips.

Wei Ying chuckled. All this pomp and acting... “I’ve never seen someone so brazen either. A rascal acting as a taoist now, Xue Yang?”

Xue Yang threw his head back and burst into rambunctious laughter, breaking his perfect bow. “My, my, the first in the Yiling Patriarch’s books? Well, this is an honour.”

“Enough with the chit chat,” Wei Ying said pleasantly. “What do you want?”

In an almost dizzying display, Xue Yang stops laughing, stalking over to a table and dropping a spirit capturing bag onto the table.

Wei Ying reached out, pressing his palm onto the bag. The soul inside barely breathed, and it laid in glimmering, shining pieces, hairline fractures splitting it further.

“Xue Yang. You’re capable of restoring the Stygian Tiger Amulet. Why ask me to do something like this?”

“You’re the founder. Of course you would have more experience in these matters.” Xue Yang took off the blindfold around his eyes, and Wei Ying observed his face. “What I cannot do, you obviously can.”

There was desperation written into those eyes, Wei Ying thought. Good. Perhaps he could try and tease more information out. Lan Zhan was in position—had been, for a long time now—in case things went wrong.

“Ah, you flatter me, Xue Yang. But there have been attempts, haven’t there?” Wei Ying asked gently, taking note of the way Xue Yang stiffened. “There are signs all over the city. You should know that it’s impossible now, and rightly so. This soul is fragile. What do you want me to do with this? It’s beyond saving, at this point.”

“Even if you aren't able, you must perform a miracle then. You've come back to life, restoring a shattered spirit should be nothing. And the longer you take... well, that young master over there won't last much longer without the cure.” Xue Yang jerked his head towards Jin Ling, and Wei Ying made eye contact with Lan Zhan for a split second.

Not yet , he tried to say. *Wait* .

“I caught three other boys just now. If you agree to help me, then I won't use them as my test subjects. Do you agree?”

“Is this how you always ask for help?” Wei Ying leaned back, amused. The three boys... he must have been referring to Jingyi and Sizhui. But who was the last one then?

“Of course. I'm a rascal, after all.”

“But... restoring a spirit isn't easy, and your offer isn't very attractive to me... You don't think I care if they live or die, do you?”

“Then what do you want... Wei *qianbei* ?”

Wei Ying smiled triumphantly. Oh, he was never all that good with politics, but he had a sharp tongue on him, and an even sharper wit. And now, backing Xue Yang into a corner... granted, Xue Yang had technically built the walls around himself, but Wei Ying still allowed himself to feel a touch of satisfaction.

“Oh, nothing much. Just the truth about that dismembered corpse and the shattered soul.”

Chapter End Notes

I've decided to censor the bathtub scene slightly! It'll still stay in, but I prefer unbearable sexual tension to... the culmination of it. Hey, it's a practice for writing scenes like that, anyway, so it'll be fun!

To those of you who have been with this book from the start, thank you so much. Your comments are what inspire me to continue writing and publishing chapters daily.

Ahh, well, there I go again, getting all sappy in the end notes. Honestly, I should save this for the last chapter, which is still a long way to go~

Chapter 22

Chapter Summary

I decided to save the Empathy scene for the next chapter, since I wouldn't be able to get this one out if I wanted to write the Empathy scene in too, so it's gotten a little short. Ahh, I hope you enjoy this chapter, and comments and kudos really make my day!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Xue Yang's smile melted into an ugly snarl, and he drew his sword and attacked Wei Ying. He simply smiled and waited, trusting in *him*.

Bichen shoots out from a crack, blocking Shuanghua and forcing Xue Yang back.

"Aiya, Lan Zhan, you should've come later. I almost got it out of him!" Wei Ying grinned when Lan Zhan's eyebrow raised slightly, the equivalent of a disbelieving look for him.

"Fine. If this is how you want to play it." Xue Yang lifted his fingers to his mouth and whistled sharply, summoning Song Zichen to his side.

"Wen Ning. There's no use going after them now. He's retreated." Wei Ying called, but the fierce corpse had gone.

"Not retreated. Hiding."

"He wants something from me, so he will definitely come back." Wei Ying nodded, watching as Sizhui and Jingyi filed in, along with an unfamiliar face. "Open wide, and let me check."

He peered into their mouths, checking the colour of their tongues and the whites of their eyes. Discoloured, and starting to purple.

"Congratulations! You have corpse poisoning!" Wei Ying clapped his hands, ducking under one of Jin Ling's swipes at his head.

"Are you mad? Why the hell are you congratulating us? We're poisoned!" Jin Ling demanded.

"Well, it'll make for a good conversation starter, don't you think? And anyways, take this as a learning experience." Wei Ying grinned. "Corpse poison will rot you from the inside out until you join the undead army here. And that's the best case scenario. The worst case is that you will die in agony and be summoned as a zombie."

Sizhui looked faint at the thought, and the unfamiliar disciple—whom Wei Ying learned was called Ouyang Zichen—looked ready to throw up.

“Now, do you want to be cured?”

All four disciples nodded frantically, and Wei Ying stifled a laugh. Oh, these young ones were so easy to tease, and their reactions were gold.

“If you want to be cured, you must listen to me very carefully, and you must do as I say, okay?”

They nodded again, and Wei Ying turned to Lan Zhan.

“Do you think that this place would have glutinous rice?”

“We can find it. Some houses are cleaner.” Lan Zhan swept out of the courtyard, and Wei Ying ushered the group after him, telling them to take it slow and regulate their breathing to slow the spread of the corpse poison.

Finally, they found a coffin home that looked cleaner than usual, and Wei Ying whooped when he found a decently stocked kitchen.

“Ah, it’s time to cook. Lan Zhan, could you help me get the spices? Oh, and you four, just sit down and rest. The less you move around, the harder it is for the poison to move around.”

The glutinous rice went into the pot first, then when it had cooked sufficiently in the water, Wei Ying added spice liberally, until it was pink—he knew that most people couldn’t hold spice as well as he did, of course, so he had to go easy on them—and let it simmer for a while before turning around at the sound of footsteps.

“And where do you think you’re going, Jingyi? You have to eat this, otherwise you’ll become a hopping corpse.”

Jingyi turned around slowly, looking at the porridge like it was poison that Wei Ying was forcing them to eat, rather than the antidote. Wei Ying huffed and scooped out a bowl, moving over to Jin Ling and pouring the porridge into his mouth.

He didn’t have to wait long.

“What the hell?! You psychopath, what are you feeding me—mmph!!” Wei Ying shovelled more porridge into Jin Ling’s mouth, smiling sweetly as he thrashed around.

“Eat up, Jin Ling. The rest of you, eat as well. Don’t moan and cry about this, it’s good to train some spice tolerance.” Wei Ying wagged his ladle at them, and Lan Zhan gently plucked it from his hands, ladling out three more bowls for the disciples.

“Eat.”

“See! Even Hanguang-jun doesn’t seem fazed by the spice, and he’s from Gusu Lan too.”

“Young master, that’s not true. Hanguang-jun can’t stomach spice as well.” Sizhui gasped through a mouthful of porridge.

“Really? But I thought...” Wei Ying frowned, turning to Lan Zhan, who lifted his sleeve and hid his mouth. All the times that they had met up for food—once, back in Yiling—Lan Zhan had ordered food laden with spice.

Come to think of it, did Lan Zhan even touch the food...?

Wei Ying turned back to Jin Ling, who seemed to have resigned himself to this unique brand of torture, and he drank the rest of the porridge without complaint, allowing Wei Ying to observe how the rest of the disciples scrambled for water after just one sip of the porridge.

He took the time to walk around the coffin home, shutting the doors and sticking a locking talisman on the door.

“Have you finished all of your porridge? Okay, listen up. This is very important, and you are privileged to learn from me.” Wei Ying sat down, smiling at the disciples’ watering eyes and swollen lips. Aiya, they couldn’t even take such weak spice.

“What do you mean? You’re just a lunatic, what do we have to learn from you?” Jin Ling managed to say through his tears.

Wei Ying shrugged and gestured to Lan Zhan behind him. “Don’t believe me? You can ask your Hanguang-jun for proof. Aren’t I a good teacher, Lan Zhan?”

“Mn.”

Wei Ying turned back to the rest of the group smugly. “So? Will you listen?”

“This one will listen to whatever Mo *qianbei* has to say.” Sizhui bowed slightly, and Wei Ying’s heart softened at that. Oh, they were so young and inexperienced. He’d have to teach them well.

“Right, glutinous rice is the antidote to corpse poison, so next time you encounter it, you know what to do, don’t you?”

A thud rang out. It sounded like someone had run headlong into the door, but the talisman held firm. Silence, as though the person was backing up, then another thud. This time, it was accompanied by the sound of rapid tapping again.

“Oh heavens, it’s back again! The tapping!” Jingyi whimpered, backing away from the door.

Wei Ying glanced at Jingyi sharply. “Again? What do you mean again?”

Sizhui stepped forward. “Mo *qianbei*, this tapping sound has followed us since we stepped foot into the city. But I... I don’t think that it is a resentful ghost. Without the tapping, Hanguang-jun would have never found us.”

“Mn.”

“Oh? Well, let’s see what we can teach you four then.” Wei Ying sauntered up to the door, peering through one of the numerous cracks in the door. “Okay, who wants to go first? Come on, we don’t have all day.”

“You- you want us to look for the ghost? Look at the ghost and... observe it?”

Wei Ying nodded. “There’s nothing wrong with turning this into a teaching experience. Come! Let’s see what you can see in the shortest amount of time.”

One by one, he prodded the young disciples towards the door, where they reluctantly pressed their eyes to one of the cracks. All of them leapt away with yells of shock, and Wei Ying almost laughed himself sick.

“All cultivators must have courage. Being scared means losing concentration, and losing concentration can mean a fatal strike. So? What did you see?”

“White eyes.” Jin Ling volunteered.

“A young woman who is blind. The tapping sound must come from a cane, but I have never seen anyone so nimble while blind.”

Wei Ying clapped. “Good, good! Sizhui has a good eye. Jingyi, Ouyang? What about you two?”

“White eyes too. And blood around her mouth.”

Ouyang took a little longer to reply. “I think that if she is cleaned and dressed properly, she would be a pretty young maiden. It’s such a shame that she is dressed in the clothes of a beggar, and her face is so disfigured...”

“Well, well, we know who is the hopeless romantic among us now.” Wei Ying laughed as Ouyang’s face reddened. “Alright, so we’ve figured out her identity, yes? Now it’s time for the field practice.”

“Field practice! You’re not suggesting-”

“Yes.” Wei Ying grinned cheekily at Jin Ling. “Try not to be too afraid, please?”

And with that, the talisman slipped off the door.

Lan Zhan has been on many night hunts. He's seen all manners of frightening beasts and monsters, and he has killed many too.

Nothing compared to seeing this particular ghost.

When the door opened, there was silence, drifting in like the perpetual fog that draped over the city. Then, the sounds of tapping started. It got louder and louder, until in a gust of cold wind, the young woman ran in.

Gasps from Sizhui and Ouyang were hastily stifled, and Jingyi and Jin Ling disentangled themselves from where they had jumped together when the ghost ran into the funeral house.

Wei Ying just looked thoughtfully at the young woman. The ghost looked confused, pushing around her cane as though to feel where she was. Slowly, he approached her.

“Excuse me, miss? Do you need something from us?” Wei Ying asked kindly.

The lady nodded frantically, and moved over to one of the coffins, tapping on the lid insistently.

“Looks like she wants us to open the coffin.” Wei Ying glanced at Lan Zhan, silently asking, and oh, it filled his heart with a kind of quiet joy that Wei Ying would ask for his help first.

“Apologies.” Lan Zhan murmured, striking the lid of the coffin and sending it sliding off with a sonorous crash. The girl dropped her cane, running trembling fingers over the body inside.

“Xiao Xingchen.” Wei Ying breathed. “He’s...”

The girl screamed, and that sound was so tortured that Lan Zhan had to turn away, only daring to look back when the animalistic sounds of pain subsided into sobs.

“Why can’t she speak?” Jingyi wondered.

The girl looked up, tears and blood mixing into a pink liquid flowing from her blank eyes and streaking her face. She shook her head and opened her mouth. Black blood poured out, though it disappeared before it touched the floor, simply a spectral imitation of blood.

Sizhui and the others jumped, shuddering at the ghastly sight. Only Wei Ying seemed unfazed by this revelation, nodding to himself. “Her tongue was cut out—I’m assuming by Xue Yang?”

Hearing the man’s name, the girl’s face twisted into a look of utter fury, and she pointed at the body and drew a line across her neck. The meaning was clear: Xue Yang had killed Xiao Xingchen.

“But why?” Wei Ying mused. “It’s going to be difficult to get answers, unless I... ah! I know! I can use Empathy!”

Lan Zhan felt a chill go down his spine. That spell was supremely dangerous; there was a reason why some of the first songs they were taught was Inquiry.

“Empathy, Mo *qianbei* ?” Sizhui looked fascinated.

“Yeah! It’ll be way more accurate and quicker than Inquiry, and the array doesn’t take much work anyway. Let’s see... hm, we have just enough space, if we squeeze a little. Does anyone have anything to draw with?”

After a brief argument, sticks of cinnabar were brought out, and Wei Ying immediately started on the sketch.

Lan Zhan, however, was conflicted. On one hand, Empathy was truly the fastest way to seek out the answers to their questions. But it involved linking two souls together, so if one of them was hurt, then the other would be hurt as well.

Then there was the problem of resurfacing. Empathy allowed the users to go through the memories of the past, and if one wasn't careful, they would sink deeper and deeper into the illusion, and that was when bad things started to happen.

“-Lan Zhan gave me this Clarity Bell, so Jin Ling, I entrust this to you.” Wei Ying pressed the bell into Jin Ling's hands and guided the girl to sit in the centre of the array. Wei Ying sat down, and Lan Zhan wordlessly took his seat opposite of Wei Ying.

“I will stabilise the array.” Lan Zhan stared at Wei Ying, almost daring him to chase him away. But Wei Ying just seemed shocked, but he shook it off and turned to Jin Ling.

“If you think that me or Hanguang-jun is in any danger at all, ring the bell. It'll end the array immediately, got it?”

“I-”

“Promise me, Jin Ling. If any one of you senses any danger at all, no matter how trivial, you have to ring the bell.”

Lan Zhan closed his eyes, sending his own spiritual energy into the array, preparing it for Wei Ying. All he needed to do was to simply will the array into existence, and Lan Zhan would take care of Wei Ying's core.

There was a quiet hum, and when Lan Zhan opened his eyes, it was to a bustling scene in a marketplace, Wei Ying standing beside him.

Chapter End Notes

I just started 2ha, and good grief, I felt my heart crack like every five chapters I wanted to die why is it so sad

Chapter 23

Chapter Summary

Wow! This chapter was supposed to be the Empathy scene, but Lan Zhan took over my fingers and told me to extoll the virtues of Wei Wuxian, and honestly, who am I to deny the Hanguang-jun?

But seriously, this scene came out so fast that I was surprised, actually. But I truly believe that Lan Zhan would just stare at Wei Ying shamelessly when they're alone, because no one would believe Wei Ying if he said that Lan Zhan would be like this

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“Well, hello there, Lan *er-gege*. I guess you get to be with me in this memory too?” Wei Ying nudged Lan Zhan playfully. But Lan Zhan couldn’t find it in himself to reply, because now—in this dream state, where your soul was bared—he could finally see Wei Ying, and understand him.

Wei Ying’s soul was...wrong. It looked jagged and broken, almost like shattered glass that was glued back together. It swelled, well past his body and trailing on the ground like a grim parody of a wedding gown. His dantian—where his golden core was supposed to be—was dim, his weak golden core smothered by the shadows that he cultivates and feeds.

Lan Zhan wanted to cry. He wanted to drop to his knees and gently kiss away all of Wei Ying’s pains, but he knew that his *xingan* would just pull Lan Zhan back to his feet and smile, chiding him for being too sappy. Or he would recoil, confusion and disgust on his face.

Lan Zhan tried not to think about the latter.

“Oh, look. There’s our girl.” Wei Ying murmured. He barely reacted when Lan Zhan wrapped his fingers around his wrist and sent a pulse of spiritual energy into Wei Ying, watching as the shadows faded, withdrawing into the fractured glass of Wei Ying’s soul.

Was this what Hua *Chengzhu* had to see every time he looked at Wei Ying? This insidious, writhing mass of ink and obsidian? He found himself rubbing the pendant that hung from his waist again, and he wondered if Wei Ying had ever seen it.

Surely he must have known what the pendant meant? Hua Chengzhu had fixed Lan Zhan with a stare that was laden with meaning when Wei Ying had pressed the ornament into his hands with a shaky smile.

But no matter how much he looked through Gusu Lan's texts, he could not find anything about gifting someone a piece of jade. However, he had found a short story about a god and a ghost king, and Lan Zhan had smiled faintly when he saw that the illustrations in the book were so very clearly Hua *Chengzhu* and Xie *dao Zhang*.

He had no idea how the book had come to be here, but he was seeing more and more of these kinds of stories pop up; star crossed lovers, fighting against the world and learning how to love. Perhaps Lan Zhan yearned for something like that with Wei Ying too.

There had been a vague reference about gifting Xie *dao Zhang* a ring, and though it was never mentioned what the ring was made of, Lan Zhan's breath had hitched in his throat when the book had described it as a show of absolute trust.

And Lan Zhan had dared to hope. He had hoped that Wei Ying would see the pendant, and he would realise how much Lan Zhan cared for him, how much he had languished beside his love—so close, yet so far—while he watched Wei Ying destroy himself.

"Lan Zhan?" Wei Ying whispered. "Are you okay? You've been spacing out a lot."

"Apologies, Wei Ying. I was far away." Lan Zhan's heart lightened when Wei Ying laughed, intertwining their fingers together.

"Yeah? Well, stay with me, okay?"

Wei Ying probably meant for Lan Zhan to tether himself mentally, but Lan Zhan allowed himself to dream of a day where Wei Ying would smile at him and extend a hand, inviting Lan Zhan to share everything.

"Mn." Lan Zhan hummed. If Wei Ying had asked him to follow him into hell, Lan Zhan would have asked how long they were going for. He sincerely believed that hell was nothing to Wei Ying, and that if he put his mind to it, Wei Ying could do anything he wished.

Together, they watched A-Qing—for that was her name, that poor little girl ghost who had lost her sight and her voice—living with Xiao Xingchen, and then later on, Xue Yang.

Lan Zhan was only paying half of his attention to the vision, but Wei Ying was focused, his silver eyes bright and sharp, following every movement in the vision as though watching a particularly interesting dance.

"Lan Zhan. You're staring." Wei Ying said, and for a split second, his eyes flickered to Lan Zhan.

"Mn. Wei Ying is beautiful." Lan Zhan admitted shamelessly. He wanted to memorise the look of his love, and now, sitting beside him, he felt as though he was overwhelmed with quiet, gentle love. Love, and so much relief that he thought that it would never fade.

Wei Ying blushed, which was a delightful look on him. "Lan Zhaannnn! You can't say these kinds of things, my heart won't be able to take it!"

"Wei Ying will have to build up a tolerance, then."

“Honestly, I thought we were on a mission, not to flirt like we did in Cloud Recesses.”

And oh, that sufficiently distracted Lan Zhan to the point that Wei Ying turned back to the scene before them. Flirting? Was that what Wei Ying was doing when they were younger? Lan Zhan tried to match the behaviour to what he had seen of Wei Ying’s flirtatious behaviour—which is to say, that incident with Mianmian—and came up woefully short of information.

‘*Wei Ying*’, Lan Zhan thought with no amount of desperation. ‘*You confuse me so, my zhiji.*’

The scene before them had changed from the bustling marketplace into a desolate city.

Xiao Xingchen was clearing out corpses quickly and efficiently, and Xue Yang was pointing them out.

"Something's not right with these corpses." Wei Ying murmured. Lan Zhan would take his word on that; none was more familiar with corpses than Wei Ying.

"Xue Yang's behaviour is suspicious."

"I don't think Xue Yang is capable of doing anything without seeming suspicious." Wei Ying snickered as the scene melted into one at the chasm, where a man stepped forward.

"Song Zichen. He is still alive." Lan Zhan murmured.

"Maybe we'll see how he dies." Wei Ying raised an eyebrow when A-Qing hid behind a tree, listening in to Xue Yang and Song Zichen's conversation. She was also very clearly not blind, as seen from the way she peeked out from behind a tree.

“She’s a good actor.”

“She is. But pretending to be blind is not a noble act.”

“Aiya, Lan Zhan. She’s not had a very good life, so she had to do whatever was possible to put food in her mouth. When you’re young and hungry, black and white, right and wrong doesn’t matter a lot anymore. I would know.” The last sentence was said so softly that Lan Zhan could’ve sworn it was a figment of his imagination, if not for the melancholy look in Wei Ying’s eyes.

“Focus.” Lan Zhan reminded him gently, sending another pulse of spiritual energy to Wei Ying. His golden core was starting to look much better, the shadows clinging to it receding slowly.

Together, they watched Xue Yang cut out Song Zichen’s tongue and sprinkle corpse poison on him, laughing and taunting all the while. Song Zichen looked outraged, lunging towards Xue Yang.

“Oh.” Wei Ying said softly as Xiao Xingchen appeared, running Song Zichen through. It was a clean kill, but Lan Zhan could only dread the inevitable agony that would follow once Xiao Xingchen knew what he’d done.

“Are you hurt?” Xiao Xingchen turned in the approximate location of Xue Yang, who was still grinning like the cat that got the cream.

“No, dao Zhang. I can’t believe that there are even corpses out here.”

Xiao Xingchen nodded, a slight frown crossing his face. “I thought I had purged most of the corpses here.”

Song Zichen let out a low moan, running his hands along the sword that had impaled him. His hands shook so badly that he cut himself several times, but when he touched the hilt, he looked up at Xiao Xingchen hopelessly.

“This is truly pitiful.” Wei Ying muttered, glancing towards A-Qing, who had covered her mouth with her hands and was crying silently. “No child should have to see this.”

A-Qing scrambled out after they had left, bowing repeatedly to Song Zichen and apologising, struggling to say that she would bring justice to him, so please don’t haunt her dao Zhang.

The next few days were filled with an unbearable sort of tension that was felt only by A-Qing. Xue Yang still acted like nothing had happened, cracking jokes and going on night hunts with Xiao Xingchen.

A-Qing had to wait until Xue Yang left the house before she could say anything. Xiao Xingchen still treated them nicely, leaving candy for the both of them before he left, and cooking for them.

When A-Qing spilled everything she knew to Xiao Xingchen, she looked shaken, and had gladly hidden when Xiao Xingchen told her to, saying that he would deal with this.

“Ah, dao Zhang! You’re just in time, I got these fresh vegetables at a bargain-”

“Xue Yang. Is there something you’re not telling me?”

The solemnity of the tone stopped Xue Yang dead in his tracks, and he let the basket of vegetables dangle from his arms.

“Whatever does dao Zhang mean?”

“Do not lie. Where is Song Zichen?”

Xue Yang smiled, and his expression twisted into something feral and dark. “Right here, dao Zhang.”

A fierce corpse leaped out, and Xiao Xingchen barely had time to parry the blow before he was engaged in a vicious sword fight with the corpse of Song Zichen.

“Oh heavens. I don’t like where this is going.” Wei Ying muttered. Lan Zhan thoroughly agreed. This was a recipe for disaster.

“You dare dabble in the demonic arts!?”

Xue Yang cackled mirthlessly. "I dare to do a lot of things, dao Zhang! For example, why don't you check his sword?"

Xiao Xingchen paused, realising the corpse had stopped moving, and he ran his hands slowly along the blade, inching towards the inscription close to the hilt of the sword.

"Fuxue," Xiao Xingchen muttered with a growing horror, stumbling back and pressing his hand to his forehead. "Oh, oh, what have I done?"

Xue Yang moved in like a predator going in for the kill. "What haven't you done, Xiao Xingchen? Did you know, all those corpses you exterminated? Ah, I wonder how you would react if you heard their pitiful screams when I cut out their tongues? Shuanghua can only sense resentful energy, not tell the living from the dead."

Something in Xiao Xingchen seemed to break at the horrifying realisation that he had been killing humans poisoned by corpse poisoning, not actual corpses. Xue Yang's ravings became more and more manic, as he paced, his eyes bright and alive with a terrible light.

"You should have seen them! All of them, bowing to dao Zhang and praying that you would spare their life! And you cut them down like dogs."

"No... no..."

"Oh, yes," Xue Yang said gleefully. "And Song Zichen came to look for you, did you know that? You killed him, and his last sight of you was with your sword impaled through his chest!" Xue Yang broke into crazed laughter, and Xiao Xingchen dropped to his knees, a shrill cry bursting from his throat.

"How does it feel, dao Zhang? Xiao Xingchen, you've finally figured it out, huh?"

Xiao Xingchen stood, the bandages around his eyes now completely stained red. He picked up Shuanghua, and in an elegant motion, slit his own throat.

Wei Ying stifled a groan at the sight. "Oh, this is a tragedy. Lan Zhan, what will we do? A-Qing, she-"

"Wei Ying. Watch."

Xue Yang stared at Xiao Xingchen with something akin to disbelief. He walked forward slowly, rolling the body over and cradling it. At that moment, he looked like a child who had broken his favourite toy.

"Hey... Xiao Xingchen, wake up. This isn't the time for jokes, you can't play around like this..." Xue Yang pressed his hands to Xiao Xingchen's throat, trying to stem the flow of blood, but it was no use. He fumbled out a spirit trapping pouch and collected Xiao Xingchen's soul, staring at the bag with an intensity that could rival the sun.

"This... this is better. That's right, this is a better situation." Xue Yang nodded, looking at the spirit pouch hungrily. "Someone who listens to me and is obedient. Xiao Xingchen, do you hear that? You can't die. Not for as long as I live, you can't die."

A-Qing's eyes were swimming with tears now, and she turned away to hide, but Xue Yang was faster.

"A-Qing, A-Qing. You're such a good actor, you know. You even fooled me." Xue Yang's voice was oily and warm, and A-Qing struggled to get her wrist out of the iron grip that Xue Yang had her in.

"Since you want to be blind so bad, then I'll grant your wish!"

"No! Let me-"

"Mo qianbei ! Hanguang-jun!"

The Clarity Bell worked like a charm, and Lan Zhan blinked, looking around. They were back in the cottage again, and the juniors were crowded around the array. A-Qing was flickering lightly, and Wei Ying seemed to be leaving the array much slower, his face twisted into a frown.

"Hanguang-jun! Someone is outside, and they're trying to get in! We barricaded the place, but it won't last long."

Lan Zhan knew that, from the way the talismans flared weaker and weaker each time there was a resounding crash, the old wood groaning under the repeated assault.

He stood up, looking back at Jin Ling who was still shaking the bell frantically beside Wei Ying's ear.

"Continue ringing the bell. I will go outside and buy some time." Lan Zhan unsheathed Bichen, and with a final glance at Wei Ying's tortured countenance, soared out of the door, drawing a stronger protection array behind him.

It would hold a little longer, while he fought Xue Yang.

Chapter End Notes

I live for the junior quartet interactions, honestly

Chapter 24

Chapter Summary

The uh. The Yi City arc took shorter than I expected. Wow, uhm. Well, I guess I have to mention that this chapter was... far shorter than what I'm used to. It's like, 1.5k words, but I was rushing and I couldn't do much more for the Yi City arc. So I hope you enjoy!

Wei Ying didn't like where this was going. First the vision had stunned him, then there was an annoying sound in his ear, and the warmth that Lan Zhan had brought him was steadily leaving, replaced by the bitter cold again.

“- *qianbei* ! Oh, no, this is bad... Hanguang-jun is outside fighting for dear life, and Mo *qianbei* can't wake up.”

“Jin Ling, are you sure you're ringing the bell properly?”

“I swear to the gods, Jingyi, shut up and guard the door before I break both your legs!”

Wei Ying blinked open his eyes, glancing around rapidly.

“Right, why are you guarding the door again, and why is Hanguang-jun outside?”

“Mo- *qianbei* , you're finally awake!” Sizhui looked tremendously relieved. The poor lad was probably stretched to the limits taking care of things here. “Hanguang-jun is outside, fighting off Xue Yang. The corpses found us, and we've barricaded ourselves inside.”

Wei Ying got up, stomping his feet a few times to regain feeling in them before turning to the juniors. No resentful energy; not that it'll matter anyway, his body couldn't take it. So that left talismans and spells.

“Lend me one of your swords.”

Sizhui unsheathed his sword slowly, and Wei Ying cut himself on the blade, collecting the blood in his palm. He dripped the blood onto the floor, concentrating on A-Qing's and his greatest desire.

Xue Yang had to die. For everything.

From the drop of blood, immense waves of resentful energy ignited, roiling underneath the earth like it had simply been waiting for a call. Perhaps they had, since the energy was notoriously easy to influence. Once Xue Yang's name was mentioned, the city's worth of resentment howled for blood.

“With prairie fires it fails to die, when spring winds blow it regains life. Eyes behind thy long lashes, lips parted and smiling in tease. Mind not the good or the evil, with smeared eyes I summon thee!” Wei Ying muttered, pressing his bloodied hands together in a seal.

A wave of blood red fire rolled outwards, and he turned to the door.

With a few smudges of blood, the array on the door shattered, revealing hundreds of paper dolls standing outside silently. They looked eerie, their faces frozen in painted smiles but killing intent rolling off them in waves.

The spell summoned all the paper dolls in the city, but it weakened his hold over them, so he could only give simple commands. Now though, he really only needed one command.

“Kill them all.”

The paper dolls shot off into the distance, and Wei Ying waited until he heard the groans of the corpses fade away, chasing the new enemies. Then, he turned to Sizhui.

“You’re the most responsible out of all of them, so I entrust them to you. Leave this place quickly. Don’t be afraid, I’ll take care of the rest.”

“I’m not afraid, Mo *qianbei*. You... you have the same feeling as Hanguang-jun. Every time you and Hanguang-jun are around, I feel very safe. I know you won’t let anything hurt us.” Sizhui said sincerely.

“Ah? Aiya, what do you mean by that, hm? I’m just like Hanguang-jun? I’m just another cultivator.” Wei Ying laughed and waved them off. Then, he ran towards the sound of steel against steel, dodging and weaving between corpses and paper dolls.

Lan Zhan probably had it in the bag already, but Wei Ying wanted to talk to Xue Yang. There must be a reason why they were led here, where this tragedy had unfolded. The light drizzle obscured his vision somewhat, but he found the place easily enough.

When Wei Ying got to the site, Xue Yang had already summoned Song Zichen, and the fierce corpse was currently fighting against Wen Ning. He made a pulling gesture, focusing on the resentful energy coating the nails, and with a wet squelch, the nails in Song Zichen’s head pulled free.

With that out of the way, Wei Ying watched closely, and when Lan Zhan sliced open Xue Yang’s outer robes, Wei Ying grabbed his chance and darted forward, snatching the spirit trapping pouch away.

When Xue Yang noticed, he clutched his chest like Wei Ying had personally torn out his heart.

“Give it back!” Xue Yang snarled.

“What, Xiao Xingchen’s soul? It doesn’t even belong to you!” Wei Ying patted the spirit trapping bag gently. “And why bother? Someone who doesn’t have the will to live... I can assure you that Xiao Xingchen has no wish to come back.”

“I don’t care!” Xue Yang melted into the fog, his ramblings echoing around them. There was the sound of tapping again, and when Wei Ying heard footsteps, a clear knock sounded where it was.

“A-Qing. Follow the sounds.” Wei Ying murmured to Lan Zhan.

“Xiao Xingchen doesn’t get to decide when he dies. I do! I’ll- I’ll-”

“You’ll do nothing of the sort.” Wei Ying said pleasantly. “Wen Ning, head back to the group and protect the juniors. Lan Zhan and I will catch up later.”

“Understood.”

“Little blind brat!” Xue Yang snarled, finally having caught on to A-Qing’s plan. “Aren’t you afraid I’ll tear your soul apart?”

“Come on, Xue Yang. Indulge a curious mind, why don’t you? Why bring Xiao Xingchen back to life? To go back to the good old days? I’ll have to shatter your dreams; Xiao Xingchen likely hates you now.”

“Go back to the good old days? Don’t make me laugh. He wants to be virtuous and kind? I’ll turn him into a fierce corpse! I’ll make it so that he’ll have the blood of thousands on his hands!”

“Aiya, do you really hate him that much? Why did you kill Chang Ping then?”

“He took my finger, so I’ll take his clan from him.”

Wei Ying shook his head. Xue Yang sounded exactly like the vengeful ghosts that Hua Cheng talks about. Nothing on their minds except revenge, and even then, their thoughts on how to go about it were muddy and unclear.

“Ah, so it was for revenge. And with Shuanghua, no less.”

The rapid footsteps stopped, and Wei Ying smiled.

“Xue Yang, you did get revenge. But who did you avenge? You, or... someone else? If you really wanted to avenge him, the person you should kill is you.”

The words hung in the air for a long moment, then a tap rang out, louder than before.

“You little brat-”

Lan Zhan whirled around, his robes billowing around him. There was a quiet gurgle, then a muted thud.

“A-Qing!” Wei Ying shouted, rushing forward. The ghost had fallen out of the tree, beside Xue Yang, and she was dissolving, her soul fragmenting. A spirit trapping bag solved that, and she joined Xiao Xingchen’s side in Wei Ying’s pocket.

Wei Ying opened his mouth to warn Lan Zhan as Xue Yang reached into his robes and lifted something to his mouth, but he needn't have worried.

A bright flash, and Xue Yang's arm lay several feet away, his hand clasped over something small and golden.

Wei Ying had barely had time to determine that it was a small barley candy before blue light illuminated the clearing, and he squinted at the overcast sky.

"A teleportation talisman!?" Wei Ying shouted, the wind screaming in his ears as he braced against the sheer power of a teleport array of this size. "Lan Zhan! Xue Yang!"

The light dimmed for a moment to reveal a man clad in black, holding Xue Yang's body, before it died off altogether, leaving nothing behind. No signature, no excess spiritual energy, nothing.

"They wanted Xue Yang's body, even when he was dead. Those talismans require a lot of energy to activate, and to hide the signatures too?"

"The Stygian Tiger Amulet. It must be with him."

Wei Ying shrugged. "Well, we can't do much now, Lan Zhan. Let's go back and find the juniors."

"Mn."

When they got back to the place where they had first entered the city, the rain had stopped, and it was already close to evening already.

Song Zichen was waiting for them at the city gates, and Wei Ying passed A-Qing and Xiao Xingchen's souls to him. Lan Zhan passed him Shuanghua.

"Xiao Xingchen was your closest friend. Shuanghua is yours to care for."

Song Zichen took the blade, wrapping it in a dark cloth and strapping it to his back. He took the two bags, bowing to Wei Ying, then Lan Zhan.

"Song Zichen. The matter of Yi City has been resolved. So what will you do with Xiao Xingchen's soul?"

The fierce corpse seemed genuinely taken aback by this question, and he considered it for a moment before drawing his sword and scratching characters into the dirt.

Cremate the body. His soul will rest in peace now.

"And after that?"

Roam the world. Exorcise evil with Xingchen. When he is coherent, I will apologise. I will-

Song Zichen took a deep breath and his next words came slower.

I will tell him that I am sorry. I will say that it was not his fault.

Chapter 25

Chapter Summary

April Fools! For my prank, I will write 5k words!

No really, this chapter took me so long because I agonised over the last chunk, so... heh. Also, I missed a day, so I will hurl myself into the abyss now! I really hope you enjoy this chapter, because good god it took me far too long to maintain the unbearable tension while still keeping it lighthearted, and I'm still not a hundred percent sure I managed to do it.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The first thing the juniors did when they got back to the city was to buy paper money and a lantern. They had heard of A-Qing's fate, and they wanted to honour her.

"We have to mourn Qing *guniang* and Xiao *dao Zhang* ." Sizhui had said with surprising solemnity. "Hanguang-jun, Mo *qianbei* , please allow us this."

And then they proceeded to cry into the small pile of joss paper that they were burning. To their credit, they had chosen a little nook near the river, just under the pavilion that Wei Ying and Lan Zhan were relaxing in.

"Qing *guniang* , you didn't deserve such a sad fate! Xiao *dao Zhang* too... What a tragic tale!" Jingyi sniffed, tossing more paper into the small fire.

"Aiya, you kids... knock it off already, there are living people here. And besides, no one's going to get the joss paper!"

Jin Log pointed an accusing finger at Wei Ying. "How would you know! You've never been dead!"

"I-" Wei Ying paused, turning to Lan Zhan. "Is that why I didn't get anything? Goodness, I had to mooch off Hua *qianbei's* money for a long time!"

Lan Zhan arched an eyebrow slightly, and Wei Ying threw himself onto a low stone bench dramatically.

"Aiya, Lan Zhan! I can't believe you didn't burn paper money for me and left me a beggar as a ghost."

Lan Zhan frowned slightly. It was clear that this was not his intent, and Wei Ying had to stifle a giggle.

"No need. I will pay for whatever Wei Ying wants."

"But what if I'm a ghost? What then? Will you burn joss paper and a paper mansion for me then, Lan Zhan?"

"No need." Lan Zhan repeated firmly, and that seemed to be the end of the conversation.

Wei Ying toyed with the qiankun pouch, prodding at the soft lumps inside. Now, they had the arms, the legs, and the torso. All they needed was a face for their little friend, and when he mentioned this to Lan Zhan, he huffed and turned away.

"Alright, you children. It's getting late, and good Lans go to bed at *haishi*, right? We'll book an inn and stay there before setting off. Shoo! Shoo!" Wei Ying put out the fire and hustled the group into a nearby inn.

But along the way, they heard the sounds of a fight, along with barking. Wei Ying instinctively gripped Lan Zhan's sleeves tighter, and he didn't object when Lan Zhan gently swept him behind his back.

"Lil Apple! Get away from Fairy- ah, Lan Zhan, Lan Zhan! The dog, it's getting-"

Lan Zhan patted him gently and stepped forward, and immediately, Fairy and Lil Apple quailed, inching away from each other.

"Lil Apple! Come here, I missed you so. Next time, don't go messing around with dogs, okay? They're bad. Bad!"

"Fairy isn't bad!" Jin Ling cried indignantly from where he had crouched down to inspect that hellhound. "Your donkey kicked my dog! And what sort of name is Lil Apple?"

"Like Fairy is any better." Zichen scoffed, rolling his eyes. "Lil Apple is named so because he likes to eat apples! What's wrong with that?"

"You-!"

Jin Ling and Zichen's eyes widened, and they scratched at their lips frantically, turning to Lan Zhan.

"Noisy."

Wei Ying burst into laughter, and he didn't stop until they had reached an inn and gotten Lil Apple situated in the stables.

"How many rooms, young masters?"

Wei Ying opened his mouth, "Thre-"

Lan Zhan swept in like an angel who was personally responsible for Wei Ying's mortification. "Two. Both of them must be the biggest that you have."

"Two? Lan er-gege, what are you up to now? Are you going to do something heinous?" Wei Ying winked, clinging onto Lan Zhan's back as he paid for the rooms.

Jin Ling looked like he'd rather be whipped by Zidian ten times than be here. "Gross, I don't want to know. Thank the heavens that I won't be sleeping on the same level as you two."

"Children must behave!" Wei Ying called out, still clinging to Lan Zhan as the latter walked up the steps slowly. "*Laoban*, could you bring your strongest wine to our room later?"

"Of course, young master!" The boss took the juniors' orders too, and Wei Ying turned his attention back to Lan Zhan, who had brought them to their room. Wei Ying got comfortable, sighing contentedly as he stretched out on the bed and watched the sun go down.

"Lan Zhan. Thank you for just now." Wei Ying said softly.

"There is no need for thanks and apologies between us." Lan Zhan murmured, walking over to sit beside Wei Ying's knees, turning his head to watch the sunset as well.

"Lan *er-gege*, are you always this lenient with everyone?"

"Just for Wei Ying." The fondness in Lan Zhan's eyes was soft, and Wei Ying found himself melting into the bed as Lan Zhan reached out, circulating spiritual energy through a gentle hand around his calf.

"Lan Zhan, get off. I'm dirty all over." Wei Ying groaned, pushing away his friend and sitting up. "Oh! Did you order anything just now? Our dinner should be coming soon."

"Mn."

"Young masters, I have brought your meal."

Wei Ying immediately jumped off the bed, making a beeline towards the dishes being laid out on the table. There was pork, spiced and seasoned until it was red, and a serving of mapo tofu, and some kind of thick stew that was savoury and had a thin film of chilli oil floating on top. Steamed vegetables and bowls of steaming rice completed the meal, and true to the owner's word, she had brought them a jar of wine and two cups.

"Oh, this all looks so good, Lan Zhan! Come on, start eating before I devour everything on this table!" Wei Ying spooned a large portion of pork onto his rice, groaning at the spice on his tongue. In contrast, Lan Zhan took a seat and ate very little, mostly helping to top up Wei Ying's plate.

"Lan Zhan~ It's so lonely, drinking alone." Wei Ying was floating on the pleasant buzz of alcohol, despite only having drunk four cups, and he filled another cup, tilting it towards Lan Zhan. "Drink with me?"

He had expected Lan Zhan to turn away, perhaps with a muttered noise of disapproval. He had not expected Lan Zhan to grab the cup and down the contents. Wei Ying gaped, watching as Lan Zhan swayed hypnotically, his eyes fluttering shut.

No way.

The famous Hanguang-jun had passed out from one cup of wine? No wonder there was a rule that forbade drinking! It was to protect the Gusu Lan clan!

Wei Ying huffed and cleared the dishes away, setting them just outside the door for the staff to take away before he turned to his very drunk friend, his head bowed as though in prayer.

A mischievous thought occurred to him. He could do anything to Lan Zhan now! Slowly, he reached out, then poked Lan Zhan's cheek.

He remained dead to the world.

Wei Ying snickered, but he had to muffle a yell as a head dropped down from the window.

"Young master Wei?"

"Wen Ning? What are you doing here- Wen Ning!" The last part was accompanied by an earth shuddering thud, and Wei Ying rushed to the window. Wen Ning was lying on the floor, a puzzled expression on his face.

"Wen Ning! Are you okay?"

"Yes, young master! Should I come back up?"

"No, no. I'll come down to you, just... wait a moment, okay?"

Wei Ying turned to Lan Zhan, and hooked his arms around Lan Zhan's waist with a silent apology. After a few harrowing moments where he almost dropped Lan Zhan, he'd finally tucked the man into bed and drew a blanket over him.

"Sweet dreams, Lan Zhan ." Wei Ying giggled and climbed out the window, dropping down to meet Wen Ning. "How are you, Wen Ning?"

"I... I think I'm getting better, young master Wei. I've regained more of my mental faculties already, and I think our bond is back up." Wen Ning glanced up hesitantly, and Wei Ying smiled when he felt the gentle knocks on his consciousness.

Wen Ning had always been very respectful of Wei Ying's mindspace, often leaving it untouched. When he heard the quiet knocks against his consciousness, Wei Ying couldn't help but tap back.

"I think the nails closed it off from you, because I could always sense when you were around, Wen Ning." Wei Ying nodded at the shackles around his legs and wrists. "Do you want me to break these for you? I can't imagine that it must be comfortable."

“That’s quite alright, young master Wei. You don’t need to—”

“But I want to.” Wei Ying pouted childishly. “Come on, Wen Ning. Indulge me? It would help me sleep a little easier.”

He turned to go get a sword, but something white blurred past him and kicked Wen Ning into the dirt. He jumped violently, turning to meet—

“Lan Zhan?” Wei Ying was dumbfounded. Wasn’t he passed out...? “What are you doing here?”

“Young master Wei...”

“Ah? Ah, ah! Lan Zhan, don’t kick Wen Ning again, don’t do that!” Wei Ying wrapped his arms around Lan Zhan’s waist and pulled backwards, hauling him back a little bit. Wow, he was really solid.

“Young master Wei, what’s wrong with Hanguang-jun?”

“He’s... a little drunk right now.”

Wen Ning looked between the two for a long moment before standing up and bowing to Lan Zhan.

“Second master Lan.”

Lan Zhan covered his ears and stepped in front of Wei Ying, as though to shield him from Wen Ning.

“Look, Wen Ning, could you hide for now? Find somewhere safe and lay low, alright? We can talk later, but I have to get this guy back into the inn.”

“Understood, young master Wei. And please... be careful.”

“Be careful, yourself.”

“Alright. He’s gone. You can’t hear or see him anymore.” Wei Ying turned to Lan Zhan, huffing in exasperation. “Hmm? Aren’t you covering your ears? How can you hear me now?”

Lan Zhan refused to answer (the nerve!), instead pretending like he wasn't the one who interrupted them a moment ago. Finally, Wei Ying’s words seemed to have filtered through, because Lan Zhan finally let go of his own ears, staring blankly at Wei Wuxian.

His eyes were so clear, so honest that a desire for mischief surged through Wei Ying. As though something inside of his body had been ignited, he smiled teasingly, “Lan Zhan, are you going to answer whatever questions I ask? Do whatever I tell you to?”

“Mn.”

“Okay then... Take off your forehead ribbon.”

Obediently, Lan Zhan reached behind his head and slowly untied his ribbon. He took off the white forehead ribbon, which had been sewn with drifting clouds, and passed it to Wei Ying without so much as a peep.

Holding the ribbon in his hands, Wei Ying turned it over a few times, examining every angle of it. There really wasn't anything so special about it, it was genuinely just a ribbon. Wei Ying felt sorely disappointed—he had thought it hid some sort of Lan sect secret. So why was Lan Zhan so mad when he took it off back then?

Or perhaps the past Lan Zhan simply hated him and everything that he did? That thought was rather depressing, and Wei Ying pushed it away.

Suddenly, he felt something tighten at his wrists. Lan Zhan had tied both of his hands together using the forehead ribbon and was starting to make knots over it.

“What are you doing?”

His first reaction was to get out of this, but he wanted to see what exactly Lan Zhan wanted to do, so he let him continue. After Lan Zhan secured his hands together, he first tied a simple knot. He paused for a while and, as though he felt that something wasn't quite right, and changed it to a tighter knot. He then paused again, seemingly still unsatisfied, and tied another knot on top.

The Gusu Lan Sect's forehead ribbon was a strip of fabric that hung down at the back after it had been fastened. Even when tied up, it was very long, so Lan Zhan was able to knot the ribbon very firmly. Lan Zhan tied seven or eight knots on the ribbon, forming a stack of small, ugly-looking lumps, and finally felt pleased enough to stop.

“Lan Zhan, Lan Zhan, do you still want this ribbon of yours?” Wei Ying laughed a little hysterically, tugging on his bonds. Nothing gave.

Lan Zhan's frown dissolved, giving way to a soft look of wonder. Holding onto the other end of the forehead ribbon, he lifted Wei Ying's hands in front of himself, as though he was admiring a masterpiece he had just created. With his hands suspended in the air... Wei Ying wondered if he looked like a criminal right now.

Wei Ying blinked. Wasn't he supposed to be the one teasing Lan Zhan? “Take it off.”

Lan Zhan happily reached for his collar and sash, as though he fully intended to strip Wei Ying there and then. Wei Ying panicked and twisted out of Lan Zhan's grip, his hands still bound in front of him.

“Don't take my clothes off! Take off the thing around my wrists. The ribbon! Lan Zhan, please? Pretty please?”

Hearing his request, Lan Zhan furrowed his brows again, and proceeded to do absolutely nothing.

“You said that you’ll listen to me, didn’t you? Be a good boy and take it off.” Wei Ying coaxed.

Lan Zhan glanced at him, then silently looked away, as though he couldn’t understand what Wei Ying was saying and had to ponder upon it for a while longer.

“Oh, now I get it! You’re so eager to tie me up if I tell you to, but you can’t understand it if I tell you to take it off. Is that right? Lan Zhan, you’re so naughty!”

The Lan Sect’s forehead ribbon was made from the same material as its uniform—that is, although it looked flimsy, it was actually quite sturdy. And, since Lan Zhan had wrapped it tightly around and tied a long strand of knots, Wei Ying couldn’t struggle out of it no matter how hard he tried.

Lan Zhan seemed content as he tugged at the ends of the forehead ribbon, swinging them around.

“Can you please take it off? Hanguang-jun, how can someone as graceful as you do such a thing? What’s the use of tying me like this? It’s going to besmirch your reputation if someone sees us like this, right?”

Hearing the last sentence, Lan Zhan started to drag him toward the streets. Wei Ying dug his heels in, struggling with every fibre of his being.

“Wait a moment! Lan Zhan! What I meant was that it’d be bad if someone sees this, not that you should let someone see this. Hey! You’re just pretending to not understand me, aren’t you? Are you doing this on purpose? So you’re only gonna understand what you want to understand? Lan Zhan, Lan Wangji!”

Before he even finished speaking, Lan Zhan had already dragged him into the inn.

The juniors were still eating and fooling around, and they were in the middle of playing a drinking game. It was easy to see that they were drunk, and it amused Wei Ying endlessly that there would always be somebody watching the stairway that led to the second floor, keeping an eye out for Lan Zhan. None of them expected that Lan Zhan would suddenly drag Wei Ying through the main entrance, bold as brass. Silence fell over the small group when they turned around.

Then the room erupted into chaos.

Jingyi hurled himself at the cup of liquor on the table, hoping to cover it up, knocking over a few bowls and dishes along the way. The object that he wanted to cover up became even more conspicuous.

Sizhui stood up, his eyes wide. “Hanguang-jun, why- how did you come through the main entrance? Weren’t you and Mo *qianbei* upstairs?”

Wei Ying laughed. “Aiya, your Hanguang-jun was feeling a bit too hot and decided to take a stroll outside so that he could also catch all of you off guard. You see? Here you are, drinking

when you're not supposed to."

Secretly, Wei Ying hoped that Lan Zhan would drag him upstairs without a word and... pass out, or whatever it was that drunk Lans did.

Just as the thought passed through his mind, Lan Zhan dragged him toward the juniors' table.

Sizhui jumped, finally noticing the absence of the forehead ribbon. "Hanguang-jun, your forehead ribbon..."

Before he could finish his words, he saw Wei Ying's hands, who attempted a weak laugh. It came out a little deranged. As though he felt that not enough people noticed this fact, holding the ends of the ribbon, Lan Zhan held up Wei Ying's hands and displayed it for everyone to see.

Wei Ying could die of mortification right now. If the earth opened up and sent him to the depths of *Diyu*, he would be able to die in peace right now.

The chicken wing that Jingyi was holding in his mouth plopped into his bowl, splattering the sauce onto the front of his clothes. He didn't even seem to notice, his eyes fixed on the forehead ribbon with an expression like one would have if they watched two disciples crash midair: horrified but intrigued, unable to tear their eyes away.

Only a single coherent thought went through Wei Ying's brain: After this, Lan Zhan would have to go into seclusion—not because of punishment, but because he would most likely never be able to face anyone ever again.

Jin Ling was bewildered. "...What's he doing?"

Wei Ying laughed nervously, trying to tuck his hands behind his back. It was during these times that he detested Lan Zhan's clearly superior arm strength.

"Han...Hanguang-jun is just showing you guys a special way to use the Lan Sect's forehead ribbon."

Sizhui looked slightly doubtful. "What kind of special way?"

"When you find a really strange corpse and you feel that you should take it back to examine it properly, you can take off your forehead ribbon and bring it back like this."

"But you cannot do that! Our sect's forehead ribbon is..."

Sizhui stuffed the chicken wing back into Jingyi's mouth, muffling the rest of the sentence.

"Oh, I see! I did not know that it could be used in such a way!"

Seemingly satisfied, Lan Zhan dragged Wei Ying up the stairs.

He entered the room, turned around, closed the doors, latched them, and finally pushed the table over as though he wanted to block out an imaginary enemy. Watching Lan Zhan hurry

around, Wei Ying couldn't help but ask: "Are you gonna kill me here?"

Lan Zhan didn't answer; he just dragged Wei Ying over and dropped him unceremoniously onto the bed.

Wei Ying's head knocked lightly against the wooden backing that was joined to the bed, causing him to wince slightly. Is Lan Zhan trying to get him to adhere to the rules of sleeping at nine?

Lan Zhan lifted the hem of his white robes and sat down elegantly on the bed, reaching out to feel Wei Ying's head. Although he was expressionless, his movements were exceedingly gentle, as though he was asking if it hurt.

As his hand felt around, Wei Ying's lips twitched upwards into a smile. Well, he could have some fun, right?

"It hurts! It hurts a lot, Lan Zhan!" He turned around, rolling on the bed and warbling through crocodile tears.

Lan Zhan's brow creased slightly, and he brushed his hands over Wei Ying's shoulders gently, as though to reassure him. The thought warmed Wei Ying's heart, almost enough to make him stop teasing Lan Zhan.

Almost.

"Why don't you let me go? Hanguang-jun, it's so tight that my hands are almost bleeding. It hurts so much! Take off the ribbon and let me go, okay? Okay?"

Lan Zhan covered his mouth, muffling Wei Ying's further responses.

So, he pretends not to understand the things that he doesn't want to do, and if he really can't pretend, he's just going to prevent me from saying them?! How rude! Wei Ying thought furiously to himself. Fine, now that things are like this, don't blame anything on me. That's how he wanted to play the game, huh?

Wei Ying parted his lips, sticking out his tongue and licking Lan Zhan's hand. He would have bitten down had Lan Zhan not whipped his hand away like he had been scalded, cradling his hand to his chest.

Wei Ying took a deep breath, getting ready to lord his victory over Lan Zhan. Just as he felt that he one-upped Lan Zhan again, he saw him turn around. Sitting on the bed, Lan Zhan hugged his knees and clutched the hand that Wei Ying had just licked to his chest, not moving at all.

"What's this? What are you doing?"

Lan Zhan looked like he was undergoing an enormous emotional epiphany. With the way he was acting, people who walked upon the scene might actually think that Wei Ying did something absolutely scandalous to him—though, maybe to Gusu Lan, licking someone's hands might be a rule too.

“You didn’t like it? Well, it’s not my fault if you didn’t like it. You’re the one who was being so pushy and didn’t even let me speak. Why don’t you come here, and I’ll wipe it off for you?”

He reached toward Lan Zhan’s shoulder with his bound hands, but Lan Zhan avoided him. Seeing how quietly he nestled at the corner of the bed, Wei Ying felt the familiar urge of mischief again.

Kneeling on the bed, he shuffled toward Lan Zhan and smiled, and in the most devilish tone that he could manage, he whispered coyly, “Are you afraid, Lan *er-gege* ?”

Lan Zhan jumped off the bed at once, continuing to stand with his back to him and maintained the distance between them. Wei Ying was finally starting to enjoy himself. This was the kind of fun he was looking for.

He grinned as he calmly got off the bed.

“Aiya, what are you hiding for? My hands are still tied, and I’m not even scared, so why would you be scared? Come here, I won’t do anything to you. Come here.”

He approached Lan Zhan, and it was clear that he harboured no good intentions at all. Lan Zhan ducked around the wooden screen only to stumble into the table. Wei Ying walked past the screen, chasing after him, while he went the other way around. They circled the screen for quite a number of times, and Wei Ying was just starting to feel the fun of it when the magnitude of the situation hit him.

Playing hide-and-seek? What was he doing? Had he finally gone mad? Lan Zhan is drunk, so that can be excused, but he was stone cold sober! Wei Ying debated if he could drink himself into amnesia with the alcohol on the table.

Noticing that Wei Ying had stopped chasing him around, Lan Zhan stopped as well. Hiding behind the screen, he showed only half of his face, peeking silently at the direction of Wei Ying.

Wei Ying watched him carefully. Lan Zhan still looked so prim and proper, even when he had literally been playing hide and seek with him.

“Do you want to continue?”

Lan Zhan nodded solemnly.

Wei Ying struggled to hold back his laughter. Lan Zhan wanted to play hide-and-seek with him now that he was drunk! A sect like the Gusu Lan Sect prohibits noise, fooling around, and even walking quickly. It stood to reason that Lan Zhan definitely never had so much fun when he was young.

Aiya, whatever , Wei Ying thought, throwing caution to the winds. *He won’t remember a single thing after he sobers up anyways. I might as well keep on playing with him.*

He took a few more steps toward Lan Zhan, pretending that he was going to chase him. As he had expected, Lan Zhan started to run in the opposite direction. As though he was playing with a toddler, Wei Ying cooperated as best as he could, chasing him around the screen a few more times.

“Run faster, run faster or I might catch you! I’m gonna catch you! If I catch you, I’m going to lick you again. Are you scared now?” Wei Ying originally intended it to be a threat, judging from the violent reaction that he had gotten out of Lan Zhan. Anyway, it wasn’t like he would actually go through with the threat.

However, Lan Zhan suddenly walked toward him from the other side of the screen, and the two bumped into each other.

Wei Ying was planning to catch him. He didn’t expect Lan Zhan to just walk right into his arms. He was so shocked that he even forgot to reach out.

Seeing that Wei Ying didn’t do anything, Lan Zhan took matters into his own hands. He lifted Wei Ying’s bound hands and brought them over his neck.

“You caught me.”

“Ah? Yes, I caught you.”

As though he was waiting for something to happen but it never did, Lan Zhan repeated the three words again, slower. Wei Ying thought he heard a shiver of excitement in his voice.

Wei Ying frowned. “Yeah. I caught you.” He caught him. What else did Lan Zhan want? What did he say? What was he going to do after catching him...No. No way.

Wei Ying hit him lightly on his arm. “Lan Zhan! You’re so shameless! This time doesn’t count. You walked over yourself.”

Before he even finished his words, Lan Zhan’s expression had darkened. He looked extremely unhappy. Oh, this wasn’t good. This can’t be. When Lan Zhan is drunk, he not only likes to play hide-and-seek, but also likes to be licked?

Wei Ying fought the surge of hysterical laughter, struggling to take his arms away from Lan Zhan’s neck, but the other man’s grip kept him trapped.

Wei Ying huffed, noticing one of Lan Zhan’s hands just happened to be pressing onto his arm. Wei Ying thought for a moment, then shifted over, moving his face closer. He pressed his lips on the back of Lan Zhan’s hand in a kiss, and halfway up, he stuck his tongue out, skimming lightly over the porcelain skin.

Again, Lan Zhan flinched and removed his hand as fast as he could. He lifted Wei Ying’s arms from around his neck, turned his back to him and darted to the side again. He clutched the hand that had been licked and faced the wall silently.

Does he like this, or is he scared of it? Maybe it’s both at the same time? Wei Ying wondered.

Lan Zhan turned around, his face as calm as always, and said, “Again.”

Wei Ying tilted his head, confused. “Again? Again what?”

Lan Zhan hid behind the wooden screen once more and peeked at him with only half of his face showing. His intentions were as clear as could be—again, you chase, I run.

Wei Ying deserved credit for how fast he took it in stride. Really, he should get some sort of award for dealing with Lan Zhan while he was drunk. This time, having only been chased for a short while, Lan Zhan ran into him again.

Wei Ying narrowed his eyes accusingly. “You really are doing this on purpose, aren’t you?”

Again, Lan Zhan brought Wei Ying’s arms around his neck as though he couldn’t understand what his words meant, waiting for him to fulfil his promise again.

Am I just going to let Lan Zhan have fun all by himself? Of course not. He wouldn’t remember anything that I do to him now, anyways. So I’ll do something better for him. Wei Ying smirked, the familiar coil of mischief igniting again. Oh, he was going to have so much fun.

With his arms around Lan Zhan, Wei Ying led him to the bed, then asked, “You like this, don’t you? Ah- don’t turn around, just speak. Do you like it or not? If you like it, we don’t have to run around every single time. How about I let you have as much fun as you want?”

As he spoke, he held up one of Lan Zhan’s hands, bent down, and kissed between two of his slender fingers. Lan Zhan’s fingers twitched, like wanted to take his hand away again, but Wei Ying held it tightly, not allowing him to do so. Lan Zhan would take what he got.

And then, Wei Ying pressed his lips onto his knuckles, taking his time. Each kiss was accompanied by a quick swipe of his tongue sometimes, and he felt heady when Lan Zhan’s breath would stutter at the touch. He breathed gently, letting his breath fan over the back of his hand, and he kissed Lan Zhan’s hand again, this time softer, more reverently.

Oh, Lan Zhan was far more intoxicating than ten jars of Emperor’s Smile.

Lan Zhan couldn’t pull his hand back no matter how hard he tried, and instead clenched his fingers together into a tight fist. Wei Ying lifted up his sleeves, revealing the pale wrist, then kissed it as well. He couldn’t resist lingering there, licking gently at Lan Zhan’s pulse and smiling at the sharp intake of breath.

Wei Ying looked up to Lan Zhan and smiled. “Is that enough?” He whispered hoarsely. “Or do you want more, Lan *er-gege*?”

Lan Zhan pursed his lips, refusing to speak a single word. Wei Ying finally sat up straight again and continued, his voice unhurried. “Tell me. Did you burn any paper money for me?”

There was no answer. Wei Ying laughed out loud and inched toward him. He ducked his head, pressing a light kiss to Lan Zhan’s chest, right where his heart beat.

“If you don’t talk, I’m not gonna give you any more. Tell me. How did you know it was me?” Wei Ying whispered, pressing another feather light kiss to Lan Zhan's shoulder.

Lan Zhan closed his eyes, and Wei Ying could almost *hear* his self restraint snapping. His lips quivered, as though he was on the verge of confessing.

Wei Ying stared at those soft lips, and as though he was in a daze, he leaned forward and kissed Lan Zhan chastely. Maybe not so chastely, because after the kiss, he licked Lan Zhan’s lower lip, as though coyly suggesting... something. Both of them widened their eyes.

A moment later, Lan Zhan raised his hand. At once, Wei Ying realised what he’d done. He immediately broke into a cold sweat, fearing that Lan Zhan would strike him dead on the spot, for desecrating the Second Jade’s propriety and purity. Lan Qiren would have his head if he ever found out, so Wei Ying quickly scrambled off the bed. Turning around, he saw Lan Zhan smack his own forehead, the force so strong he now lay unconscious, collapsed on the bed.

Ah?

What just happened?

Chapter End Notes

I took psychic damage every time wwx referred to Lan Zhan as a friend please send help in the form of comments it'll make my day and dissipate my shame

Chapter 26

Chapter Summary

Whew! 3.9k words this time round, and I took a few creative liberties with the escape of the body ;p

Also, it has come to my attention that the fact that lwj played Inquiry for 13 years for wwz is in fact, not a fact and a headcanon. Can you imagine my devastation. I was literally so shell shocked, but this is what I get for inhaling content like I'm dying tomorrow. Still, I'm keeping it in this fic because I quite like the idea, but I must reiterate that it's merely a popular headcanon (I can see why), nothing more, nothing less.

Right, onto the serious stuff! Warnings!

Warnings: graphic descriptions of someone's hands literally turning to ash (just the skin), and mentions of really bad burns. It's just one paragraph, the one that starts with "My hands? What about my-" :>

The next morning, Wei Ying woke up sore and in pain. He had been loath to share a bed with Lan Zhan after last night, and he had made a small nest of blankets on the floor. So the pain was normal. Expected, even.

What wasn't normal was that he was on the bed instead of on the floor, and Lan Zhan was gone. For a moment, everything was fine. The birds were chirping, the juniors were arguing... all was well in the world.

Then last night came crashing down on him like Zidian's electrifying bite, and he groaned, covering his face as shame burned through him. Oh gods, he was never going to be able to look at Lan Zhan again.

"You're awake."

Speak of the heavenly deity, and he shall descend. Lan Zhan stepped through the doorway, and Wei Ying had to pause for a moment to lament how unfair it was that Lan Zhan looked pristine, even though it was criminally early in the morning.

"No thanks to you." Wei Ying grumbled. "I hurt all over from sleeping on the floor, Hanguang-jun. You passed out last night like a good little Lan, and-"

"Did I do anything last night?"

"No. Definitely not. Nope." Wei Ying blurted out, the lie slipping out smoothly. He sent a silent apology to Lan Zhan, but if he had to get out of this with the last shreds of his dignity

intact, he had to lie to Lan Zhan.

A small frown furrowed Lan Zhan's brow. "The juniors—"

"—were drunk last night, Hanguang-jun. You should make them copy lines or something!" Wei Ying cut in, grinning as he practically inhaled the sweet congee and soya milk that Lan Zhan had set out for him.

"They are children. I will adjust their punishments accordingly."

Wei Ying's mouth flapped open around a mouthful of porridge, and he had to work hard to swallow it.

"Ah? Hanguang-jun, am I hearing this right? You're going to change their punishments?"

"They are children." Lan Zhan repeated, as though this was sufficient explanation.

"When I was a child, you made me copy so many scriptures!" Wei Ying pointed out. "Remember? In the Library Pavilion!"

"You were a teenager. Only your mind is a child."

"Lan Zhan! You're so mean!" Wei Ying wailed, finishing the rest of the food and sighed contentedly. He ushered Lan Zhan out before changing into his robes and stepping out of their room.

A scene of utter chaos greeted him.

He saw Zichen and Jin Ling scrambling around, checking under tables and shouting to each other. All four winced at loud noises and bright lights, and Wei Ying snickered. The alcohol must have gotten to them last night.

"Hey kids!" Wei Ying purposely made his voice loud and peppy, and grinned at the wincing and angry glares that Jingyi, Jin Ling and Zichen sent him. Sizhui was nowhere to be found, probably thanking the inn for their hospitality.

"Will you keep quiet? Shouting like that so early in the morning." Jin Ling grouched. "My head hurts."

Wei Ying's smile grew wider. "That's what you get for drinking. Learn to hold your liquor before you drink yourself under the table, hm?"

"Shut up!" Jin Ling huffed, stomping away from Wei Ying.

"Must you agonise him so, Mo *qianbei*?" Jingyi moaned, but there was a hint of a smile on his face.

"Of course I have to! Who else will get you all to loosen up a little?" Wei Ying smacked his forehead lightly. Oh, he'd almost forgotten. "Ah, hold on for a moment, Hanguang-jun. I'll be back."

“Jin Ling! Your uncle wants to say goodbye- hey, don’t run away! Listen—” Wei Ying caught up with Jin Ling and clapped him on the back. “—when you go back, don’t keep on arguing with your uncle. Listen to him. Be careful from now on. Don’t run around trying to night hunt alone again.”

Although Jin Ling was from a prominent sect, rumours didn’t let anyone off. With both of his parents gone, it was only natural for him to want to prove himself to others as soon as possible.

Wei Ying continued. “How old are you? Fifteen? Most of the disciples around your age haven’t hunted anything amazing either, so why should you be so eager and strive for such a big first catch, ah?”

Jin Ling sulked, clearly seeing the reason but denying it. “My uncles were also fifteen or so when they became famous.”

Wei Ying bemoaned the fact that everyone decided that they should use the Sunshot Campaign as some sort of golden standard. It was a war! A war, for goodness’ sake! Things were different!

“That’s not the same! Back then, there was a war! If they didn’t fight and cultivate as much as possible, who knew if they’d be the next one to die? During the Sunshot Campaign, you’d be hauled to the battlefields no matter if you were fifteen or any other age. Now, since the situation is stable and the sects are at peace, of course the atmosphere isn’t as tense and people don’t cultivate like they’re trying to achieve immortality tomorrow. There’s really no need.”

“Even that dog, Wei Wuxian, was around fifteen when he killed the Tortoise of Slaughter. If he could even do it, why can’t I?” Jin Ling argued.

Hearing his name come right after the word before it, Wei Ying’s blood ran cold. He somehow managed to shake off the goosebumps on his back and answer cheerily. “He was the one who killed it? Wasn’t it killed by Hanguang-jun?”

After the mention of Lan Zhan, Jin Ling looked at Wei Ying in a strange way. He looked as though he wanted to say something, but held it back. “You and Hanguang-jun... Nevermind. It’s your own business. Anyways, I don’t care about you guys at all. Have fun being cutsleeves. The disease is incurable.”

Wei Ying grinned. “Hey, how is it a disease? Are you saying love is a disease?” He laughed to himself in silence; he thinks that I’m shamelessly lusting after Lan Zhan?! Oh good grief, Jin Ling really had a sense of humour, huh?

Jin Ling continued. “I already know the meaning behind the Gusu Lan Sect’s forehead ribbon. Stay by Hanguang-jun’s side properly. Even if you’re a cutsleeve, you should be a modest one. Don’t go about messing with other men, especially people from our sect! If you do, I can’t be responsible for what happened next.”

The “our sect” that he said included both the Lanling Jin and the Yunmeng Jiang Sect. It seemed that he would turn a blind eye to Wei Ying and Lan Zhan’s friendship—because that’s what they were, friends—as long as it wasn’t anyone from the two sects.

Wei Ying shook his head fondly. “You little brat! What do you mean ‘messing around with other men’? I’m not that terrible of a person. And the forehead ribbon? There’s a meaning behind the Gusu Lan sect’s forehead ribbon? Why don’t you tell me, Jin Ling?”

Jin Ling scowled at him. “Go away! Stop pretending, you know what it means. And stop messing around. I don’t want to talk about this anymore. Are you Wei Wuxian?”

The straightforward question took Wei Ying by surprise, but he responded calmly. “Do you think we’re similar?”

Jin Ling was silent for a while. Then, he suddenly whistled and called out, “Fairy!”

Having been called by its owner, Fairy sprinted over with its tongue sticking out. Wei Ying yelped and broke into a run at once, sprinting for the safety of Lan Zhan while shouting over his shoulder. “Be nice to your elders! What are you sending out the dog for?!”

Jin Ling stomped away, but Wei Ying could still hear the faint huff. “Hmph! Goodbye!”

After he said goodbye, he proudly marched in the direction of Lanling, probably still afraid to see his *shushu* in Yunmeng’s Lotus Pier. In the end, Wei Ying, Lan Zhan, Jingyi and Sizhui were left, Ouyang having bid a hasty farewell. As they walked, the juniors couldn’t hold themselves from turning around and looking back. Although Jingyi didn’t say anything, the reluctance to leave was written all over his face.

“Where are we going next?” He asked.

Sizhui piped up, glancing towards Lan Zhan. “Zewu-jun is currently night-hunting in the Tanzhou area. Are we going to directly return to the Cloud Recesses, or there to meet up with him?”

“Tanzhou.”

“Great! Maybe we can even help Zewu-jun. And it’s not like we have a destination anyway; we don’t even know where to search next for our dear friend’s head.” Wei Ying patted the qiankun pouch tucked away in his pocket. “Lil Apple! Come to papa, and I’ll feed you as many apples as you want. Yes, that’s a good boy!”

The trip to Tanzhou was filled with Wei Ying’s chatter, and he managed to coax Sizhui and Jingyi into an animated discussion about the types of plants that one could use for healing.

Still, every time it steered dangerously close to the Lan’s forehead ribbon, Sizhui and Jingyi always seemed to bring them back onto the topic of herbs. Wei Ying was confused. What was so amazing about the forehead ribbon? It was just a strip of cloth, no?

He had tried to probe gently, but Jingyi and Sizhui seemed really adamant on not talking about the situation. It wasn’t until night, when they had set up camp in a courtyard that had

allegedly belonged to a fairy, then Wei Ying could finally put his plan into action.

“Sizhui! You said that this courtyard once belonged to a flower fairy? How do you know, hm? I’m sure that the grand libraries of Gusu don’t have topics like these.” Wei Ying spread his hands, gesturing to the magnificent garden around them.

Although time had taken its toll on the plants, it still looked well tended and cared for, despite the thick layer of dust on the gardening tools.

“Uhm—” Sizhui ducked his head, his cheeks tinting pink as he glanced at Lan Zhan. When he saw that there was no punishment incoming, he cleared his throat. “—well, I read that in Tanzhou, there is a garden. No one tends to it, but it is always spotless. It’s said that a fairy lives here, crystallised from the emotions when the master of this household used to read poetry to the plants.”

“Woah. Has anyone seen this fairy before?”

“No. To summon the fairy, you have to be here and recite poetry under the moonlight. If the fairy likes your poetry, she’ll gift you an annual bloom that will last for three years. If she doesn’t, she’ll toss a flower in your face and fade away.”

“Wait, so no one has ever seen how the fairy looks?” Wei Ying barely heard Jingyi’s question over his own laughter. “How would they know how beautiful she is then?”

Sizhui shrugged helplessly. “It’s just a story. But I heard that only one person has ever seen her face.”

“Who?”

“The Yiling Patriarch, Wei Wuxian!”

Wei Ying choked on his spit. No one seemed to notice, Jingyi egging Sizhui on to continue the story and Lan Zhan... well, Lan Zhan seemed *interested* in the story, to Wei Ying’s growing horror.

“Well, the story goes that Wei Wuxian purposely read bad poetry for over twenty times, angering the fairy into throwing him out of the courtyard. Finally, when he saw the fairy’s face, he went about praising her beauty for quite a while. However, the fairy was rather irritated by this. She didn’t show up for quite a while. Whenever he came, she would pound him with a rain of flowers. The scene would be truly strange.”

Jingyi roared with laughter, and Wei Ying ducked his head in embarrassment. He hadn’t given up trying to catch a glimpse of the fairy’s face, but now, he could barely remember what she looked like. He chanced a glance towards Lan Zhan.

“Aiya, it’s just a story. Don’t put much stock into stories, or it’ll come back to haunt you.” Wei Ying waved absently. “That story is boring.”

“Are you kidding me? This is an amazing story!” Jingyi protested.

“Ah? No, it’s terrible. Who’d record a story like that?” Wei Ying turned towards Lan Zhan—the man was smiling. It was barely noticeable, but Wei Ying could see how his face had relaxed slightly, and the corners of his lips were softened. His eyes were the most expressive, glimmering with quiet joy.

Wei Ying turned away, coughing into his hand. “Right, uhm, well. Since you two like to gossip so much—it’s against the sect rules, I might add—you get to copy scriptures! Ten times!”

Jingyi made a horrified sound. “Mo *qianbei* ! Who said you could tell us to copy scriptures? We’re going to have to do handstands for so long...”

“I said so! I said—wait, handstands?”

“Some disciples do not remember their punishments.” Lan Zhan said lightly. “The handstands are beneficial for cultivation and to dissuade disciples from repeating their mistakes.”

Ooh... Wei Ying wondered what it would be like if he had been forced to do handstands while copying the rules. He’d die, most likely.

Setting up camp was quiet, and Lan Zhan immediately excused himself to patrol the area and draw an array to keep them safe. Wei Ying didn’t mind; this meant he could finally bully the answers he’d been itching to know since morning.

The moment they settled around the fire, Wei Ying clapped his hands. “Right. Since Hanguang-jun isn’t here, you can tell me about your ribbon and what exactly I did to make you look like... well, horrified and shocked.”

Sizhui looked pained, as though this conversation was going to bring him to an early grave. “Mo *qianbei* ...” Sizhui took a deep, fortifying breath. “Do you... really not know the meaning?”

“If I knew, I wouldn’t ask now, would I?”

“Yes, but back in Yi City...you made us look through the gaps at Qing *guniang* .” Jingyi muttered.

“Aiya, this is different! Come on, educate this one on the importance of your ribbon.”

Sizhui seemed to be carefully choosing his words. “Our forehead ribbon... it stands for self restraint.”

“Yes?”

“The story goes that you may only take off your ribbon in the presence of someone whom you love and cherish. The only people allowed to touch it are parents and—” Sizhui was watching him, why was he watching him? “—lovers.”

Wei Ying wondered if it was too late to run away now.

“And if you tie your forehead ribbon on someone, you are recognising that person as your soulmate. Your— your *zhiji* .” Sizhui looked thunderstruck at the realisation that Wei Ying really, truly, didn’t know about it. “Mo *qianbei* , are you alright? You look like you’re about to faint.”

Wei Ying took a deep breath to prevent himself from bursting into tears or hysterical laughter—he hadn’t decided yet—and forced a grin.

“Yeah, I’m okay, I just... I need some time to process this.” He stumbled away from the fire, dropping his head into his hands and groaning, long and loud.

Heavens above, what had he done? He’d doomed Lan Zhan! He was supposed to marry a sweet girl and have a loving wife and family, not tie someone like Wei Ying to his side! This was a terrible mistake. Yes. He’d talk to Lan Zhan about this, and maybe they could work something out. Could he take it back? Wei Ying tried not to cry. He’d messed up again. His second chance, and he’d already messed up this badly.

“Mo *qianbei* !”

“Aiya, I told you to give me-” Wei Ying stopped short.

A pile of tattered qiankun pouches lay scattered around the courtyard, and a truly enormous figure stood in the centre, dressed in a stained and torn burial robe.

He was missing a head.

Wei Ying looked at Sizhui and Jingyi, assessing their faces and bodies. No blood, so the paleness must be from shock. He cursed himself; he was the one carrying the qiankun pouches, wasn’t he? He’d left them by the fire, along with his flute!

He watched as the body walked around, taking slow, measured steps towards Wei Ying. With a few quick side steps, he avoided the body and made his way towards the juniors.

“Sorry, Mo *qianbei* . We didn’t know what we could do.” Jingyi’s eyes were wide and fearful.

“Aiya, it’s not your fault. I misjudged the amount of resentful energy our friend has here, and we haven’t played Cleansing in a while.”

“Mo *qianbei* !”Jingyi hissed, looking horrified at how loud Wei Ying was speaking. “Lower your voice.”

“Relax! He can’t hear us, you see. He has no head. But we have to get out of here, he’s looking for his head and if he catches us, he’ll rip our heads off and attempt to see if it’s the correct head. Move slowly, he can still sense wind currents. Go get Hanguang-jun, I’ll distract him.”

Wei Ying picked up a handful of pebbles and shoved his flute into his waist. Sizhui and Jingyi tiptoed around the body, and every time Wei Ying thought they got too close to the body, he tossed a pebble at it, keeping it solely focused on him.

He didn't know what went wrong. Perhaps Jingyi or Sizhui had moved too much. Perhaps he had gotten careless. Either way, the corpse lunged at the duo, and Sizhui let out a little gasp.

Wei Ying didn't need to think. His flute was stuck in his sash. It would take too long to pull out, and his mind was completely blank. He was right there. The choice was so painfully obvious. Gathering all of the resentful energy surrounding them was easy. It bent to his will, surging through his body like a swollen river pouring through a dry riverbank, erasing everything in its path.

The resentful energy in the corpse responded in kind, searing the air with its bitterness and hatred and so much pain and regret-

Dimly, he thought he heard someone screaming, but it was too late now. He drew the energy into him, then released it all in a powerful snap, layering binding enchantments and seals over the body, anything he could think of. He forced the pieces apart, sealing each one separately. His fingers moved quickly, sketching blood red talismans in the air.

Sealing, binding, a few weaker sigils for soul calming, what else, what else?

"- *qianbei* ! Mo *qianbei* !" Sizhui's frantic voice cut through the dark fog in his head, and he blinked—oh, was the night supposed to be red?—finally noticing the distraught looks on Sizhui and Jingyi's faces.

"Hi." He croaked. "Could someone put the body in a pouch? I don't know how long the seals will last."

"Nevermind the body, look at your hands, Mo *qianbei* !" Jingyi jabbed at Wei Ying's hands, his eyes as wide as saucers.

"My hands? What about my-" Wei Ying looked down and stifled the urge to scream. His hands looked like they were disintegrating. Large patches of skin had flaked away, revealing raw and red flesh. The skin that was left was ash grey, and his nails were filled with... some kind of black substance that dripped slowly, the consistency like tar. Dark smoke clung to his palms, and when he turned his hands over, his palm lines looked like he had grabbed a branding iron with his bare hands.

"Oh." Wei Ying said eloquently. "My hands."

When he moved his fingers and lifted the cuff off his wrist, he was greeted with black lines, twisting upwards and stopping just below his forearms. Curiously, there was no pain, just a slight tingle and coolness, like he had taken off a pair of heavy gloves after a long day of wearing them.

"Does it...hurt?" Sizhui inched forward, no doubt ready to pour spiritual energy into his hands. "I can heal you if you'd like."

"No, no it doesn't... it feels pretty refreshing, actually." Wei Ying held up his hands and wriggled his fingers when Sizhui made a doubtful face. "Honest!"

Unfortunately for him, Lan Zhan chose this moment to step out of the woods, followed by Lan Xichen. His eyes widened imperceptibly when he caught sight of Wei Ying's ruined hands, and he was by his side in a flash, warm fingertips sending spiritual energy into his hands.

Nothing happened, not exactly. It felt like his hands were a dead zone, completely out of reach of his own mind even though he was still whole.

"Wei Ying," Lan Zhan murmured, so low that Wei Ying would have missed it had they not been tucked so closely that he could feel Lan Zhan's warmth. "Did you?"

Those two words unlocked something in Wei Ying's chest, and he shuddered as Lan Zhan tried to press more spiritual energy into him.

"Yes," Wei Ying admitted reluctantly. "I had to. Sizhui and Jingyi were in danger."

"You-"

"Wangji. I know you care for young master Mo, but next time, do check before you give your spiritual energy. We have never seen this kind of curse before." Lan Xichen stepped out of the gloom, a gentle smile on his face.

"Zewu-jun. Hanguang-jun."

Lan Xichen nodded towards Sizhui and Jingyi. "Rest now. My brother and I will handle the rest."

Sizhui cast an uneasy glance at Wei Ying as he left, but he didn't say much more.

"Young master Mo, how are your hands feeling?"

Wei Ying thought for a moment. "Numb," he replied truthfully. "It feels like it's swollen, if that makes sense? I can't channel spiritual or resentful energy through it, it's just...dead."

Lan Xichen nodded thoughtfully, turning to the body parts scattered around the floor. A shadow passed over his face, and Wei Ying decided to shoot his shot.

"Sect leader Lan... do you know who this body belongs to?"

"I do."

"It's Chifeng-jun, isn't it?" Lan Zhan murmured. His spiritual energy was poking at Wei Ying's hands, but there were no spiritual veins there. It was like it had all just... burned away.

Lan Xichen closed his eyes briefly. "Yes."

"Is there anyone who could have done this?" Wei Ying wondered, gently pulling his hands out of Lan Zhan's hands and waving him away. "There was a lot of resentment when I forced his body apart, but-"

“Stop.”

“Zewu-jun. You know who the one behind all this is, don’t you?” Wei Ying said gently. “You just don’t want to see it.”

“I-” Lan Xichen heaved a heavy sigh. “He wouldn’t have done it. I know it.”

“Think, then. Who else did Chifeng-jun have a rocky relationship with, just before his qi deviation?”

“We can speak of this matter later,” Lan Zhan laid a hand on Wei Ying’s shoulder and turned to Lan Xichen, who looked tremendously relieved at the change of subject. “Brother. You came to inform me of something?”

“Wangji. The Discussion Conference is drawing near. You will have to come with me.”

Lan Zhan’s nose scrunched up slightly. “Wangji understands.”

A gentle squeeze on his shoulders, and Wei Ying looked over. Lan Zhan was looking at him, an unspoken question in his eyes. The moon turned his forehead ribbon into a strip of silver laid across his brow, and Wei Ying had to force his eyes to tear away from it.

Are you certain?

We can check at Golden Carp Tower.

Lan Zhan nodded. “Young master Mo will be coming with us, brother.”

Chapter 27

Chapter Summary

zowie, this one... got a little out of hand. 4.7k words, huh? These chapters just keep getting longer and longer, good grief! What do you think is the reason behind wwx's hands literally wasting away? I'd love to hear your thoughts! We're coming up on another arc now, so if you're reading this when it's complete, take a break here; the story won't run away, so you can rest your eyes and get some water!

Golden Carp Tower was just as ostentatious and gaudy as Wei Ying remembered—oh gods, was a pagoda made of marble? He wrinkled his nose at the enormous flight of steps, resigning himself to climbing all those stairs slowly and by himself, since Lan Zhan was off talking with—

A warm hand pressed against his back, and Wei Ying stiffened before he realised who it was. Ah, but he would recognise Lan Zhan anywhere, even if he was deaf or blind.

“Wei Ying.”

“Lan Zhan.”

“How are your hands?”

Wei Ying looked down at them. The healers at Cloud Recesses were completely baffled by the state of his hands, but they had all agreed that resentful energy was the cause of it. So far, they had just slathered on healing salve and wrapped it up, all while lecturing Wei Ying on how he absolutely cannot use resentful energy anymore, lest his bizarre condition worsens.

“Fine,” Wei Ying replied truthfully. “But a little itchy under the bandages.”

“Bear with it.” Lan Zhan ran a hand over the bandages, inspecting it for any signs of stains. “I will change your bandages later.”

“Aiya, Lan Zhan! You spoil me so. What if I get used to it and decide to stick to you forever? What then?”

“Then I will take care of Wei Ying.” Lan Zhan said gravely, walking forward sedately and leaving Wei Ying a sputtering mess. What- did he even hear what he was saying?

“Lan Zhan, you’ve gotten more shameless.” Wei Ying muttered, speeding up to take his place beside Lan Xichen and Lan Zhan.

“Welcome, Gusu Lan.” Jin Guangyao bowed, but when he caught sight of Wei Ying, his face had a funny little spasm. His smile melted into a grimace before that brilliant smile was back.

“Mo Xuanyu... I see you finally left Mo Village.”

“Ah?” Wei Ying said blankly. “Oh! Yes, I... erm, my entire family was murdered by a demon. The Lan disciples in charge of the case brought me back to Cloud Recesses.”

“I see.” Jin Guangyao’s face was the perfect picture of sympathy, but his lips still curled in the ghost of a smile. The effect was eerie, to say the least. “My condolences.”

“Aiya, don’t worry about it. I didn’t have a good time in Mo Village anyway. Cloud Recesses is much better, even if they do have hundreds of rules.”

Jin Guangyao nodded politely and turned to Lan Xichen, “Brother, you didn’t tell me Wangji was coming too. I will get the servants to prepare a table for him immediately.”

Wei Ying felt Lan Zhan stiffen beside him, and he hastily grabbed onto his sleeve, tugging gently. For the conference, he had donned a light blue outer robe, and Wei Ying couldn’t help but admire how it made him stand out.

It also had the added benefit of dispelling the rumours that Hanguang-jun was still in mourning. Don’t get him wrong, Lan Zhan looked amazing in white, but it had accentuated the impression of a jade statue. Now, the powder blue outer robe gave the impression of a cloudless sky; lofty, yes, but not unreachable.

Wei Ying had made himself at home at Lan Zhan’s table, but still, he couldn’t ignore the whispers and glances that were slowly increasing. He supposed that it was because Mo Xuanyu had been removed from the Jin sect in disgrace, but for the life of him, he couldn’t remember why.

Was it ever mentioned?

Jin Ling had seemed very disgusted with Wei Ying, and he knew that Mo Xuanyu was rather... How had he put it? He had ‘gone after anyone who earned his fancy, whether it be man or beast.’

Ah. His reputation in Golden Carp Tower must not be the best, judging from how the serving girls and disciples all looked at him warily. But what had he done to warrant those looks?

Wei Ying leaned towards Lan Zhan. “Hanguang-jun. Hey, Hanguang-jun. Could I stay close to you? Mo Xuanyu used to be from this sect, and I don’t want to get caught in any small talk; I think I’ll die.”

“As long as you do not provoke anyone on purpose.” Lan Zhan took a sedate sip of tea. “Do not worry about the rumours. They are just that; rumours.”

Wei Ying nodded and looked around, meeting all of the dirty looks with an even stare. They must assume that he had somehow seduced the Second Jade of Gusu, but that was far from the truth. There was nothing between them.

Did you forget about the forehead ribbon, Wei Wuxian? His mind gleefully supplied a vivid image of his wrists, bound by that long white ribbon.

Shut up, he told his brain, stuffing more food into his mouth. Lan Zhan scooped more vegetables into Wei Ying's bowl and nudged the small saucer of chilli oil towards him. He gave Lan Zhan a look of thanks and reached for the chilli, dumping it liberally over his food.

"You! Why do I keep seeing you around?"

Wei Ying looked up, meeting Jin Ling's—well, he didn't look mad, exactly, just surprised—gaze and grinned.

"I'm just here for the free food. Don't mind me."

Jin Ling crossed his arms and scoffed, and the image was so similar to how Jiang Cheng had treated him in their youth that Wei Ying lowered his head to hide his watery eyes.

"I can't believe you have the audacity to come crawling back after what you've done." Jin Ling muttered.

"Neither can I." Jiang Cheng's dry tone came from somewhere above his head, and Wei Ying cringed. He focused on his food, carefully chewing each bite and swallowing. He wasn't sure what he would do if he saw Jiang Cheng's expression. Cry, maybe.

"What? Cat got your tongue, Mo Xuanyu?" Jiang Cheng sneered.

Ah. At least he didn't reveal his appearance to the whole of the cultivating world. Perhaps Wei Ying should thank him with a fruit basket.

"You were so talkative during our interview; perhaps I should bring Fairy back out? She seemed to bring out the best in you."

Wei Ying set down his chopsticks, barely disguising his hands from shaking. He stood up, bowing to Jiang Cheng and Jin Guangyao and left without a word. The very mention of Fairy had sent blind, sticky panic through his veins, and he could barely move, stumbling into a pavilion and digging his fingers into the stone table. Not for the first time, he wished he could feel something in his hands, if only to ground himself with pain.

He glared at his hands, but even his anger was half-hearted.

What had happened? He had been—well, not on good terms, but on talking terms with Jiang Cheng previously, but it seemed like all that had been undone in a split second. Was Jiang Cheng punishing him for when he had forgotten about Jin Ling's parents? It would make sense.

No, Jiang Cheng wasn't that petty. He wouldn't... no, he cared for Jin Ling. He might have done that. Wei Ying groaned in frustration, getting up from the pavilion and meandering down the paths. Most of the servants were concentrated in Glamour Hall, so Wei Ying was free to roam as he pleased.

“Hey!”

Wei Ying turned, smiling weakly at Jin Ling. “Ah. Did you come to find me because you missed me? I’m touched, Jin Ling.”

Jin Ling snorted. “Like that’ll ever happen! I came to warn you. *Shushu* looks pissed whenever he sees you, I think he might actually kill you.”

Wei Ying had just opened his mouth to reply when a group of Jin disciples swaggered into the pavilion, their faces lighting up in sadistic glee.

“Well, well. So you decided to throw away your last shreds of dignity and come crawling back?”

Wei Ying blinked. “I’m sorry, are you talking to me?”

“Obviously! Who else would I be talking about?”

“Jin Chan.” Jin Ling frowned. “This is none of your business. Scram.”

Jin Chan chuckled. “Scram? But Jin Ling, all I want to do is to teach this disgusting Jin disciple some manners!”

The group advanced on Wei Ying, and Jin Ling stepped in front of him.

Jin Chan quirked an eyebrow, and oh, Wei Ying did not like the look in his eye.

“Jin Ling, why are you protecting this man? Don’t you hate him?”

“Whether I hate him or not is none of your goddamn business!” Jin Ling retorted. “Besides, he’s no longer part of our sect; he was kicked out a long time ago!”

“So what?” Jin Chan shrugged.

Wei Ying’s jaw made an admirable attempt to reach the floor. The audacity of this child... He should be introduced to Gusu Lan’s disciplines.

“Don’t forget: he came here with Hanguang-jun. Do you really want to anger the Second Jade of Gusu?”

At this, Wei Ying could see how the disciples hesitated. Despite all their bravado, they knew who Lan Zhan was.

“He violated Lianfang-jun!” Jin Chan jabbed a finger at Wei Ying.

Lianfang-jun? Who was that? He’d never heard that name before... wait a minute. That was Jin Guangyao, wasn’t it? Wei Ying felt like he had been struck by a bolt of lightning. Everything clicked into place, and the puzzle was revealed. Mo Xuanyu had harassed Jin Guangyao, who had gotten him kicked out of the sect.

Not for the first time, he bemoaned Mo Xuanyu's circumstances that led to this very situation. It was also likely that Jin Guangyao had simply framed Mo Xuanyu, but there was no motive, and Jin Guangyao was no fool.

Wei Ying prided himself on adapting to the situation quickly. But when he finally resurfaced, he realised Jin Ling had engaged in a fight with Jin Chan and his friends, and he was losing.

Badly.

Now, as Jin Ling's uncle—though the boy thought he was a different uncle—he couldn't in good faith allow them to beat his nephew up.

So he stepped into the fight, casually dodging badly thrown punches and ignoring the scathing remarks. Disarming all of them was something Wei Ying could do in his sleep, and within moments, all the disciples were groaning on the floor.

Jin Ling turned to look at him. "How did you do that?" He demanded.

Wei Ying smiled innocently. "Do you want to learn? Look, watch closely."

He stepped towards a disciple who had staggered towards him, his fist raised.

"Sidestep, twist, toss." He turned to look at Jin Ling. "Got it? You try."

Jin Ling was a quick learner, and Wei Ying couldn't help but feel a small amount of pride watching his nephew hand their asses to them on a silver platter.

"Who taught you to fight like that?" Jin Ling bounced to his side, breathless and probably running on adrenaline.

Wei Ying shrugged. "High on victory now, are we?"

"Jin Chan always fights dirty. He brings his friends with him, so it's hardly fair if I go against them alone." Jin Ling bared his teeth in a snarl at their retreating backs. "They've got no dignity—but you have to tell me where you learnt that move. Channelling spiritual energy to an acupuncture point is something I didn't think of."

"Would you believe it if I told you that Hanguang-jun taught me?"

Jin Ling's face twisted slightly, and an unidentifiable emotion flitted across his face. "He even teaches you these things?" He mumbled.

"Of course!" Wei Ying grinned, hoisting himself onto the railing of a bridge, staring down into the dark waters below. "But you can't use that trick too many times, they'll get smart about it soon. You have to switch it up, keep them on their toes."

Jin Ling joined him on the railing. "You're egging me on? My *shushu* always tells me to stop fighting."

"Let me guess. He'll say to take it like a man and treat others nicely?"

“Pretty much.”

“Let me tell you something then.” Wei Ying beckoned Jin Ling closer. “Don’t listen to him. When you’re young, you have to fight as much as you want. Know why? It’s because when you’re older, you have to force yourself to get along with them, to save face. But now? You can be an unruly child.” Wei Ying grinned unabashedly. “I was an unruly child, when I was your age. Always causing trouble for my sect.”

Jin Ling, the good child that he was, looked slightly dubious, but Wei Ying could see the spark in his eyes. “What are you talking about? My uncle’s advice is for my own good.”

Wei Ying sighed. Jin Ling definitely thought something was wrong with Mo Xuanyu—from what Wei Ying could gather from the whispers, Mo Xuanyu idolised Jin Guangyao, so this change in attitude was sudden.

“Aiya, you caught me, Jin Ling. The truth is... well, I’ve already fallen for someone else.” Wei Ying allowed himself a small, wistful smile. “I’ve come to the realisation that my feelings for Jin Guangyao were fleeting. I really like... I really like Hanguang-jun. He has—hey, Jin Ling! Jin Ling, why are you running away?”

Wei Ying laughed, but his brain kept repeating his words to him.

“I really like... I really like Hanguang-jun.”

He had just said that to get rid of any doubts that Jin Ling would have about his relationship with Jin Guangyao, but those words rang true in his heart.

That scared him.

He turned, and Lan Zhan was there, on the opposite end of the bridge, looking like a vision; a god descended from the heavens. The moonlight illuminated him and turned his robes into hard lines of jade, but there was a certain softness to him, like he was dusted with snow.

“Ah, Lan Zhan.” Wei Ying tried for a laugh, but it felt like the air was far too thin for him to breathe. He had never been ashamed of anything before, but he couldn’t help but wonder if Lan Zhan had heard what he’d said.

He hoped not. Those feelings were too raw to pick at, and the truth there made him feel naked and exposed.

“Mn.” Lan Zhan walked closer, and Wei Ying pressed to his side, relishing the warmth. Mo Xuanyu’s golden core was weak, barely there, and Wei Ying found himself colder than usual. But Lan Zhan ran warm, a stark contrast to his cool exterior.

“I found out why Mo Xuanyu was kicked out of the Lanling sect. Apparently, he harassed Lianfang-jun. What a scandal, right?” Wei Ying suddenly thought of Jin Ling.

“Ah, Lan Zhan, I need to ask you something. Do you remember the times that we saw Jin Ling out on night hunts? He’s always alone, isn’t he? Don’t tell me Jiang Cheng always

accompanies him. He's about fifteen soon, so why doesn't he have friends following him around?" Wei Ying mused out loud. "When we were young—"

Lan Zhan fixed him with a stare, and Wei Ying threw his hands up in exasperation.

"—alright, me, just me! Alright? When I was young, it wasn't like this."

"Wei Ying is special." Lan Zhan's eyes held an immeasurable warmth to them, looking like spun gold under the sun.

"A-ah, uhm...still! I don't think Jin Ling has any friends in Lanling sect. We just fought a few of them a couple minutes ago. Doesn't Jin Guangyao have a son or a daughter or something?"

"Jin Guangyao had a son who died young."

"Huh? How is that possible?" Wei Ying was baffled.

"The lookout towers."

"The lookout towers?"

"Mn. When Jin Guangyao proposed these lookout towers, there was general dissent. One of the sect leaders lost control. Jin Guangyao's son was caught in the crossfire, and in his grief, he tore down the entire sect. Qin Su has not been able to bear a child since."

Wei Ying sighed. "I worry for him. Jingyi calls him a young mistress sometimes, and I think he's right. Jin Ling doesn't think before he speaks, and with every word, he kicks the hornet's nest. That child is really—"

A warm hand pressed spiritual energy to his temple, easing his headache. "Let's go inside first."

"Yeah. Okay." Wei Ying breathed, the jittery anticipation coming back. He fussed over the talismans while Lan Zhan fortified the room, setting up sound repelling talismans and silencing wards. No one would hear what would transpire here.

"Wei Ying?"

"Uh, oh, yeah? I'm fine, I'm just... can you...?"

Lan Zhan filled a small cup with alcohol, and Wei Ying thought he could detect fond exasperation on his face just before he turned away.

"Just one," Lan Zhan warned, bringing the drink to his lips.

Wei Ying smiled, lifting the cup from his hands and downing it, pressing the cup back into Lan Zhan's hand. He let his fingers linger slightly, but ultimately pulled away, lying down on the bed.

His body relaxed, and he felt his soul peeling away, flitting towards the paper man held loosely in his grasp. He revelled in the sensation of safety that Lan Zhan's presence brought him, and he fully transferred his consciousness.

Lan Zhan could see the exact moment Wei Ying's soul shifted, moving from his body into the paper man. His breathing evened out, and Lan Zhan watched as the little paper man scrambled off the table, climbing his robes and pulling at his forehead ribbon. Lan Zhan thought he could almost hear Wei Ying's laughter.

Gently, he reached up to take the paper man, but it slipped down. Whether by accident or not, Wei Ying brushed against his lips. He caught the paper man up and glanced towards Wei Ying's body.

"Do not waste time. I will be here."

The paper man nodded and jumped down, floating to the door and slipping out through a small crack.

Lan Zhan did try to relax. He tried to read something from his *qiankun* pouch, but the words all blurred together. The image of Wei Ying's hands kept surfacing to the front of his mind until he could bear it no longer.

The bandages unravelled easily, and Lan Zhan ran his fingers over the deadened skin. The flesh still looked fresh, but a little dry. Only the faint smell of herbs met his nose, so it wasn't rotting. Lan Zhan pressed spiritual energy to his hands again, attempting to seal the slow, cancerous spread of the dark veins. So far, they had moved past his elbows already, but there was no sign of the damage wrought on his hands happening to any other parts yet.

Lan Zhan channelled his focus into creating a ward in Wei Ying's meridians—but they were small, almost nonexistent. That just made it easier to seal away the slow corrosion, and Lan Zhan was about to relax when Wei Ying jerked.

The wards he had put up shattered like glass, and he watched with growing horror as Wei Ying's skin split apart, black smoke pouring from the fissures. The inky black veins crawled up his arm greedily, and Lan Zhan scrambled to stop it. But as soon as it started, it was over, with only a few cracks in the skin of his wrists and the lingering chill of resentful energy to mark that anything had happened.

Lan Zhan frowned. Empathy? Why would Wei Ying need to do that? He shook his head and focused on redoing the wards, but this time with a twist. The corrosion didn't seem to be doing any harm to Wei Ying, save for burning away his flesh—and even then, it didn't seem to hurt him.

The medical salves didn't help either, and Lan Zhan didn't have a treasure trove of knowledge on talismans and wards; that was Wei Ying's area of expertise. Lan Zhan rewrapped Wei Ying's hands tenderly, taking care to hide the black veins under the bandages. He retreated from the bed, even though he longed to sit by Wei Ying's side and card his fingers through his hair.

His very being ached for Wei Ying, but... it was as though he didn't know. Lan Zhan wouldn't force him. It would be criminally unfair of Lan Zhan to make Wei Ying love him, and he did not want to repeat history. He'd seen how love would turn out if it was one-sided and forced.

Wei Ying shot upright, and the temperature of the room dropped so fast that the alcohol bottle exploded, leaving a piece of ice in its wake. He was gasping, his eyes wide and unseeing.

"Wei Ying!" Lan Zhan almost upended the table trying to get to the bed, and when his hand closed around Wei Ying's wrist, he flooded his body with spiritual energy.

The effect was immediate. Wei Ying blinked, recognition and relief flooding his features when he saw Lan Zhan. Then panic bloomed over his face, and he scrambled off the bed.

"Lan Zhan, we have to go now! Quickly, we have so little time right now!" Wei Ying stuffed the tiny paper man into a pocket, grabbing Lan Zhan's wrist and pulling him out of the room.

Under the bandages, Wei Ying was dreadfully cold, and Lan Zhan kept a steady stream of spiritual energy to him. Along the way, he managed to explain parts of it to Lan Zhan, and while he didn't catch all of it, Lan Zhan understood that Jin Guangyao was the mastermind.

"Second master Lan." The guards bowed to Lan Zhan, completely ignoring Wei Ying's nervous energy. "These are Jin Guangyao's personal chambers, you are not allowed to—"

"Oh for goodness' sake, just let us in already!"

Jin Ling rounded the corner. "You two! What are you doing near my uncle's quarters? Why... what are you trying to do?"

"I had heard that Gusu Lan prides themselves on their propriety and etiquette. Breaking into a sect leader's bedchambers in the middle of the night... well, I suppose those are simply hearsay, then."

Lan Zhan felt a familiar coil of rage stir at the sight of Su She.

"Su She." He said, hoping the other man would detect the venom in his voice. Wei Ying certainly did, from the way he turned to Lan Zhan curiously.

He shook his head. Su She's story was for another day.

"Hanguang-jun." Su She bowed, and Lan Zhan wondered if he could behead the man right there and then. But no, his brother was here, and so was Wei Ying. A crowd had also gathered. They had an audience.

"Su She." Wei Ying's voice cut through the hubbub clearly. "You clearly defected from Gusu Lan, and yet you're trying to copy Hanguang-jun. He uses the guqin; and apparently, so do you. Aren't you a pot calling the kettle black?"

"My, my. Was the reception not satisfactory, so you have all sought me out for another banquet?" Jin Guangyao stepped out of his bedchambers, a placid smile on his face. He

nodded towards Lan Xichen. “*Er-ge* .”

Lan Zhan glanced at his brother, and he watched as his brother’s expression rearranged itself into something more complex. So he knew, then.

“A-Yao. Could we trouble you to open your secret treasure vault?”

Jin Guangyao tittered. “Ah, but *er-ge* , a secret treasure vault is meant to be kept secret, yes? May I ask how you knew of it?”

“Aiya, just open it! If you don’t have a guilty conscience, I’ll swear that I’ll forget everything I saw in the vault.” Wei Ying groaned.

Jin Guangyao’s eyes snapped towards Wei Ying, and it took all of Lan Zhan’s considerable willpower to stand where he was and not step in front of that knowing gaze. “I-”

“A-Yao.” Lan Xichen’s voice dipped, until Lan Zhan could barely hear anything. “Please.”

Jin Guangyao’s smile slipped for a moment, but it was back so quickly it almost gave Lan Zhan whiplash. “If *er-ge* insists.”

Jin Guangyao let them into the room, and through a bronze mirror. Lan Zhan raked his gaze over the shelves, realising that there were notes on demonic cultivation as well. He wondered if any of Wei Ying’s things had found their way here.

“Why is Madam Qin here?”

“*Er-ge* , what’s mine is A-Su’s as well. She sometimes comes in here to admire these things.” Jin Guangyao turned, raising his voice and addressing everyone. “Everyone. This is my treasure vault. Please help yourselves.”

Wei Ying was the first to step forward, inspecting Madam Qin thoroughly. She ignored him, even when he called her name.

“So young master Mo’s intention in bringing us here was to see Madam Qin.” Su She’s voice cut through the air, shattering the eeriness of the vault.

Wei Ying did not deign that snide jab with a response, instead walking over to a heavily sealed case and flipping it open. Surprise flitted across his face, then shock and resignation.

The head was not there.

“A-Yao. What is that?”

“That is a rare treasure, *er-ge* . Let me show you.” Jin Guangyao stepped up to the weapon, taking it out of the seals. The chill in the room increased, and Lan Zhan could almost see the resentful energy curling off it in wisps.

“This is an assassin’s weapon that has killed hundreds, and it is extremely sharp. If one looks at the blade of the dagger, it will not show your reflection, but the face of the last person it

killed.”

“This belonged to...”

Jin Guangyao smiled. “That’s right, *er-ge* . It belonged to Wen Ruohan. Then it was passed to Wen Qing.”

Jin Ling cried out in alarm. “Madam Qin—!”

But it was too late. Qin Su stumbled forward and grabbed the knife. She unsheathed it, stabbing it into her stomach. She collapsed with a soft cry.

“A-Su!” Jin Guangyao cried. “A-Su, please wake up, please...”

“A-Yao. I’m sorry.”

“Er-ge. What is going on? Why would A-Su take her own life? And... Why would you all gather in front of my bedchambers and force me to open my treasure vault? Is there something you’re not telling me?” Jin Guangyao looked pitiful indeed, his face streaked with tears and blotchy.

It was this situation that Jiang Cheng, Nie Huaisang and their entourage stumbled into.

Jiang Cheng glanced over the place before asking, “What happened?”

“Some time ago, some of Gusu Lan’s disciples met with a demonic entity far stronger than what they were supposed to be dealing with in Mo Village. Wangji has been pursuing this case since then. At Yi City, the entire body save for the head has been recovered, so we cannot tell who it belongs to.” Lan Xichen hesitated. “But it was reanimated, and the motions... they were just like... like Nie Mingjue’s.”

“*Da-ge* ?” Jin Guangyao whimpered.

“Xichen-ge. Are you... referring to our brother? My brother, and your... your sworn brother?” Nie Huaisang whispered. He met Lan Xichen's gaze and tottered backwards, then sank into a dead faint.

“Dismembering the corpse... Who would do such a thing?” Jin Guangyao whispered.

Lan Xichen sighed heavily. “I don’t know. The clues ended when we tried looking for the head.”

“Ended... So you searched my place? Believing that I-” Jin Guangyao stood up. “Fine. Let’s drop the matter. But how did you know that I had such a treasure vault? And how were you so sure that *da-ge* ’s head is in my vault?”

“Xuanyu. Did you lie to *er-ge* and Hanguang-jun? What is the use?” Jin Guangyao advanced on Wei Ying, who stood his ground calmly.

“Mo Xuanyu. Back then, because of your harassment of Madam Qin, you were kicked out from the sect. But now, you came back, and you somehow got yourself Hanguang-jun’s support. But why would a righteous man like Hanguang-jun ever associate with the likes of you.”

“I won’t bring up the past. But I want to know... if you have a part to play in my A-Su’s suicide!” Jin Guangyao pulled out his sword, aiming for Wei Ying’s throat, but Lan Zhan had seen the tension in those hands. He deflected easily, then pointed his sword at Su She, who had his own sword half drawn.

“Don’t.”

Su She glared venomously. “Watch yourself, Hanguang-jun.”

“Lan Zhan.” Wei Ying whispered. He pressed his hand onto Lan Zhan’s arm, pushing down gently. “Step aside.”

Lan Zhan’s entire body wanted to revolt against that gesture, but he let Wei Ying go.

Su She immediately went after Wei Ying, who dodged and grabbed the nearest sword he could reach from the shelves. The blade sang when he pulled it out, and Wei Ying’s sword forms were fast and fluid as he disarmed Su She.

Familiar.

It reminded Lan Zhan of fights along rooftops and the smell of Emperor’s Smile.

“Yiling Patriarch!” Jin Guangyao shouted, pointing an accusing finger—the first of many to come. “You’re the Yiling Patriarch! Wei Wuxian!”

All hell broke loose.

Chapter 28

Chapter Summary

Hm. I'm not too happy with this chunk; so expect edits on this particular chapter. It was a necessary evil, but I don't want to do any evil :(Not here, at least

Warnings: suicide ideation, graphic descriptions of injury.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Wei Ying felt a warm presence settle over his wrist, comforting and steady, and he let Lan Zhan pull him out, out of the treasure vault, away from the new enemies that swarmed the pavilion.

Lan Zhan drew Bichen, knocking away the swords that came close to them. Wei Ying realised he was still clutching Suibian and turned, clocking a guard over the head with his unsheathed sword.

“Wei Ying.” Lan Zhan sounded exasperated, like he had just dropped his inkstone instead of turning into the cultivation world’s pariah overnight.

“What? I can’t draw my sword now!” Wei Ying squawked indignantly. “My core is too weak for that.”

They fought well, aiming to knock unconscious, not to kill, but there was an endless number of disciples, and there were only two of them. Soon, they were surrounded, soldiers circling them warily.

Wei Ying was so, so tired. Tired of dragging people down with him. Tired of making people take blows for him.

Just once, he could deal with this himself, couldn’t he?

The weight of living was too much for a lost soul.

“Lan Zhan. Are you sure you want to come with me? I know how to run, I can hide far away.” Wei Ying said dully. “I shouldn’t besmirch—”

“Wei Ying-”

“Aiya, Lan Zhan. Go back, go back.” Wei Ying whispered, shoving him away. This was fine. He could keep Lan Zhan safe like this. “You’re Hanguang-jun, you can’t be seen with me—”

“Yiling Patriarch, you really are worthy of your title. Even after coming back from the dead, you still managed to run circles around us. I’m impressed.” Wei Ying looked up at Jin Guanyao and felt a rush of fatigue. “Even Hanguang-jun! Has the Yiling Patriarch bewitched you?”

Wei Ying took a deep breath, mentally donning the mantle of the Yiling Patriarch.

“That’s right—”

“Wrong.”

Footsteps rang out, slow and sure. Lan Zhan walked to Wei Ying’s side, a wisp of spiritual energy brushing against him.

I’m here. He whispered. *Don’t leave me.*

“I’ve known that he was Wei Ying a long time ago.”

“Lan Zhan!” Wei Ying was appalled. This was not how he had envisioned this to go. He would say his piece, and maybe Jin Guanyao would run him through. Or they would throw him down the steps. That would work too. It was high enough to break his spine, anyway.

Lan Zhan looked at him for a long moment before drawing his sword again, facing the rest of the cultivators surrounding them.

“Lan Zhan, you don’t have to do this for me.” Wei Ying realised the hollow truth in his words. He was selfish. He wanted Lan Zhan to protect him, to throw his life on the line for him, and now that it was actually happening, it was all too fast.

“I’m used to this, you don’t have to be obligated to do this. We can leave first, you can just say you were tricked by me or something—”

“Wei Ying. Do you remember what you said in the Burial Mounds?”

“Who wants to walk on the broad avenues? I’ll stick to my single plank bridge until it’s dark!”

Lan Zhan looked at him, and his gaze was calm and steady. “I will follow you into the darkness, until the end of time.”

“Lan Zhan, you really... Last chance, Lan Zhan.” Wei Ying smiled. “Will you leave my side and take your place on the right side? Or do you want to step off the bright avenues and onto my single plank bridge?”

“With you, always.”

“So are we fighting or not?” Wei Ying tried not to let Lan Zhan see how much that affected him—from the tender way Lan Zhan looked at him, he wasn’t all that successful.

“Talk less.”

Wei Ying unsheathed his sword and plunged into battle, Lan Zhan right beside him. They worked together as easily as breathing, each covering for the other's blind spots and trusting in each other.

An opening.

“Lan Zhan!”

“Go.”

They cleared the last few steps and started to run, but a blade at Wei Ying's throat stopped him.

Jin Ling looked apoplectic with rage.

“You're Wei Ying? You're really Wei Ying, Wei Wuxian?”

“Aiya, Jin Ling, let us pass, alright? One day, I'll sit down and tell you everything, okay?”

Wei Ying walked forward, but a sudden numbness spread from his lower dantian, and he felt his side dampen. “Oh.” Wei Ying looked down at the blade jutting out from his stomach. “Oh.”

He barely saw Lan Zhan push Jin Ling away, but he certainly felt it when the sword slipped out wetly. An absence of something there, but just much more acute. Out of habit, he gathers resentful energy and plugs the wound, not realising what he had—

“Wei Ying!”

—done. Oh, right. No resentful energy.

His arms crumbled, smoke seeping out from between the bandages, and he dropped to his hands and knees, screaming as the wards in his body shattered, cutting into his muscles and flesh like glass. He could feel it, the cold crawling up his arms and eating away at his meridians, tearing apart his veins. Red bloomed across his bandages like flowers, and he welcomed the sharp jab that knocked him unconscious.

When Wei Ying woke, he realised that they had company.

“Ah, Wei Ying, you're awake. Don't rush yourself, we were having a riveting conversation with Lan Wangji here.”

Wei Ying blinked twice to make sure that he wasn't hallucinating. But no, Hua Cheng and Xie Lian were really in Cloud Recesses, taking tea with Lan Zhan. He climbed off the bed, stumbling towards them and engulfing them in a hug.

“Xie *da-ge* . Hua *qianbei* . I missed you two.” Wei Ying sobbed, squeezing them tightly. Usually, he wouldn't have cried, but it was probably the stress that made him like that.

“Silly child. You could always visit us any time you wanted. You have the dice, don’t you?” Xie Lian patted his head, the motion so familiar to how his *shijie* would comfort him that it brought a fresh wave of tears to him.

“But Xianxian is only three!” Wei Ying sniffed, his tears flowing freely. “He doesn’t know when to visit, so forgive him.”

“There is no need for sorry and thank you between family,” Lan Zhan reminded him gently, and Wei Ying managed a watery laugh.

“Aiya, Lan Zhan, you really...”

Lan Zhan shook his head and fixed Wei Ying with a gaze that was so soft and warm that Wei Ying felt like he was going to cry again. When he told them, Hua Cheng had just smiled.

“Then cry, Wei Ying. You’ve been so brave; you’re allowed to be weak too.”

Wei Ying must have had something wrong with him, because he immediately buried his head into the crook of Hua Cheng’s shoulder and wailed. Ah... but these tears were not for him. He deserved everything that had happened to him. No, these tears were for the Wens, his *shijie*, A-Yuan, everyone that he had failed. His *shushu*, all of the disciples from Lotus Pier...

Hua Cheng and Xie Lian cradled him gently, letting him get all the emotion out. Lan Zhan quietly handed him a cup of tea when he had cried himself dry, and he gulped it down thirstily. Another cup was immediately pressed into his hands, this one sweetened with honey.

“Alright?” Xie Lian murmured. “We can wait.”

“No, no I-” Wei Ying’s voice broke. “-I can continue. What did you want to talk about?”

“We’ve got some information that we think you’d like to know.” Xie Lian lifted him with surprising ease and set him beside Lan Zhan.

Ridiculously, Wei Ying felt like he was a small child again, sitting at a table with Hua Cheng, Xie Lian and Lan Zhan. These people were family, someone that he could trust with his life.

Still, it felt like he was about to discuss his reckless behaviour with Jiang *shushu* and Madam Yu again. The very thought sent a sharp tingle of nostalgia into his heart.

“First things first. Lan Wangji, do you understand the meaning of the jade pendant that Wei Ying gifted you?” Hua Cheng said, and Wei Ying smiled when Lan Zhan wrapped his fingers around it protectively.

“I have... guessed at the significance of the pendant. But it is difficult to find texts surrounding ghostly customs.” Lan Zhan looked pained at this admission, and his hand tightened around the jade pendant. Wei Ying wondered just how long Lan Zhan had spent in the library poring over books, desperately looking for any kind of hidden symbolism in the gift that Wei Ying had pressed into his hands.

Hua Cheng looked impressed. "I didn't know you would deepdive to look for the secrets of the ghost realm, Lan Wangji. In any case, this is an old ghostly tradition, so I'm not surprised you can't find anything on it. When a ghost trusts someone with their life, they give their ashes to their person, because once a ghost's ashes are destroyed, they are gone forever."

Silence fell over the quartet, and Wei Ying struggled to comprehend why they had all fallen silent. He trusted Lan Zhan with his life, did he not? Why were they all looking at him?

"Oh." Lan Zhan made a quiet choked sound, and he looked down at the pendant with a newfound wonder.

"Wait, wait, wait! Hua *qianbei*, you never told me about such a custom!"

Hua Cheng looked highly amused at this turn of events. "Wei Ying, I explained the significance to you as we were on our way to cremate your body."

Wei Ying thought of those years spent in Ghost City, frantically panning through his spotty memories. How was he supposed to remember that? He spent the better part of thirteen years being *dead* dead!

"Well then, that's out of the way, so we can move onto more pressing matters." Xie Lian cheerfully steered the conversation away, clapping once and turning to Wei Ying. "You know what we're going to talk about, right?"

"Yes, about why I shouldn't use resentful energy, blah blah blah, whatever."

"The ban on resentful energy has a reason for being there, Wei Ying. If you use resentful energy, you are strengthening your connection to Mount Tonglu. If you continue like this, your soul will be forcibly torn out of your body and returned to the Kiln." Hua Cheng said wryly. "I believe it's already starting."

"What San Lang means to say is that your situation is unique, and it's best not to do anything that might aggravate your... uhm, unique condition." Xie Lian added.

"Ah?"

"The closest I could think of was Qi Rong, my—" Xie Lian broke off. "—my cousin, who became a Ghost King after my ascension. First ascension. He possessed a body for a long time, but his situation was... different."

"Oh." Wei Ying said eloquently. "So I'm special?"

Hua Cheng grinned. "Don't flatter yourself, Wei Ying. You're a special case, but in case you've forgotten, you're still human. Gege and I have been hard at work trying to figure out what we can do, and there's only one solution."

Wei Ying waited with bated breath as Hua Cheng pulled out a folded piece of paper, spreading it out and revealing rows of tiny characters, pressed into a small space.

“We’ve been searching the libraries for any texts surrounding Mount Tonglu, to see how exactly it works,” Hua Cheng explained, tracing two lines of characters. “What we do know for a fact is that it forges new Ghost Kings, but Mount Tonglu is not the only way you can become a Ghost King; merely the most infamous.”

“I even went to ask Guoshi.” Xie Lian supplied cheerfully. “Jun Wu was of no help, as he usually is, and Guoshi wasn’t well versed in how the Kiln works.”

“Lan Wangji had the right idea to put up wards around the spread, but it has to be done with yin energy—or as you call it, resentful energy—and no, before you ask, you self-destructive disciple, it can’t be your own.”

Wei Ying snapped his jaw shut with a click.

Hua Cheng turned to Lan Zhan. “I can set up the wards again, but that means that Wei Ying cannot use resentful energy ever again. Not if he wants this body to last longer than a month.”

“San Lang.” Xie Lian gave Hua Cheng one of those meaningful looks again, and the two were locked in silent battle for a while before Xie Lian emerged victorious.

“There is another way.” Hua Cheng began reluctantly. “To speed up the process, you go back to Mount Tonglu in a human body. It will not be pleasant.”

“No.” Lan Zhan’s response was immediate. “I cannot watch him fall for a third time.”

“Lan Zhan, I-”

“*Wei Ying*.” Lan Zhan took a deep breath and turned to Hua Cheng and Xie Lian. “Could you... give us some time?”

“Of course, Lan Wangji.” Hua Cheng stood, shooting Wei Ying a look, who stuck his tongue out at him. What did that look even mean?

When the door shut, Lan Zhan crumbled.

He grasped Wei Ying’s wrist tenderly, running his thumb along the white bandages around his arms and hands.

“Do you hate me, Wei Ying?”

“What? No, I- of course not! Why would you think that?” Wei Ying scrabbled for Lan Zhan’s hands as he bows his head.

“Wei Ying has such disregard for his life.” Lan Zhan lifts his head, and Wei Ying feels all the air rush out of him. “Does he think that he is not worthy to live?”

“I... I don’t know.”

“Wei Ying. You may have been brought back for revenge, but you must know this: you are loved.”

“By who?” Wei Ying laughed bitterly. “Everyone who has ever loved me is either dead or despises me, Lan Zhan.”

“I care for you.”

“That’s different, Lan Zhan. You’re a friend, so it doesn’t count—I mean, it does, but it’s not what I was looking for—Lan Zhan? Where are you going?”

“Outside. We have much to discuss, but I must tend to affairs in Cloud Recesses. We will speak later.”

And Lan Zhan was gone in a swirl of robes, leaving Wei Ying feeling as though he had made a faux pas.

He got up slowly—his arms stiff and his abdomen still twinged slightly if he moved too fast—and walked towards the door.

Hua Cheng and Xie Lian were just outside, hand in hand and just... observing the place. They turned when Wei Ying wobbled out, but they made no move to help, and Wei Ying didn’t want them to.

“What do you think I should do?” Wei Ying asked. “With my soul, I mean.”

“It’s up to you.” Hua Cheng shrugged. “Whatever you choose, we’ll support you.”

“I...” Wei Ying trailed off, remembering the look on Lan Zhan’s face when he had mentioned jumping into Mount Tonglu. Fear and anguish was so plainly written on his face that it had scared Wei Ying.

“I won’t go back to Mount Tonglu. Not yet. But first, could you help me with something, Hua *qianbei*?”

“Oh, I don’t know...”

“San Lang. Don’t tease.”

“But gege, it’s so fun.”

“Have you heard of someone called Mo Xuanyu? His soul is still around; I can feel it.”

“And?” Hua Cheng’s eye already had a knowing glint to them, as though he had expected Wei Ying to have this request. “What would you have this one do?”

Wei Ying took a deep breath. “Help me restore his spirit and keep him safe, please.”

Hard Reset is going to take a backseat, since it's also going to be following very closely to canon, so I have thought of another fic to keep me occupied! It's called The Untameable, and it's like, very canon divergent. Basically, what if wwx tried to break the stygian tiger amulet but failed, his body taking it in instead so now, he acts as a vessel for resentful energy? Ahhh, but I've talked too much, so here's an excerpt!

“You should have died in the Burial Mounds!”

“I crawled out from there! if you kill me, I’ll never let the cultivating world off.” Wei Wuxian snarled. “All of you will die! You think I used all my strength in the Sunshot Campaign? You think just because Jin Guangshan kept me as a chained pet for years, I won’t bite?”

Chapter 29

Chapter Summary

Aiya, this chapter was so short, but only because the next one will extend a little longer. I am... so impatient for the Guanyin Temple arc, because after this, I get free rein to go absolutely apeshit with worldbuilding!

What else, what else... Ah! The Untameable is coming along nicely, but it probably won't be published immediately after this fic finishes. I need a little cooldown time, or else I'll go stir crazy. I'm already thinking of the thematic insights that I can use in Untameable, since it's going to be a very self indulgent fic, and I get to pick what I want to embody. I'm thinking eldritch (kind of? He's not exactly human anymore) wxw and junior quartet shenanigans!

Okay, okay, I'll stop talking here and let you enjoy the story now :D

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Wei Ying wasn't allowed to walk freely around Cloud Recesses anymore. He was a fugitive. The newly reborn Yiling Patriarch wouldn't be allowed free around Cloud Recesses.

He found that he didn't particularly care for the goddamned rules anymore. Still, he did try to keep out of sight of the common grounds.

After he saw Hua Cheng and Xie Lian through the portal, he roamed the place slowly, taking in the sights. It had barely changed since all those years ago, and the paths were still the same. Everything was still the same; Cloud Recesses could look the same as it did now if Wei Ying came back a century later, he was sure of it.

He found Lan Xichen in a deserted pavilion and instantly, his fight or flight instincts practically screamed at him to reach for Chenqing.

"Young master Wei." Lan Xichen's tone was pleasant enough, but Wei Ying knew what a smile could hide. "It's nice to finally be able to meet without lies."

"Yeah, I... sorry about, you know, making you think I was Mo Xuanyu." Wei Ying rubbed the back of his neck awkwardly. "I just... didn't want anyone to know I was back, you know?"

"Oh, I knew from the moment Wangji brought you to Cloud Recesses for the first time."

“You- I- why didn’t you say anything?” Wei Ying said weakly. The images of him practically hanging off Lan Zhan’s arms came back to him in terrifying clarity, and he suppressed a groan.

Lan Xichen regarded him for a long moment. “Did you know that our father brought our mother here too? He married her to save her life, and entered seclusion with her.”

“Okay...” Wei Ying nodded slowly, unsure of where this was going.

“Mother, she... killed one of the teachers here. The marriage was to save her. Wangji and I could only visit her once a month.” A fond smile flickered on his face. “Wangji looked forward to these visits more than anything else in the world.”

Wei Ying tried to imagine it. Tiny Lan Zhan, dressed in white and a tiny forehead ribbon, kneeling by a woman with the same nose as him, who would tell him stories and teach him about the world.

“What happened?” Wei Ying was cautious.

“Mother... always had a poor constitution. Seclusion did not help. When she passed away, Wangji would kneel in front of her house for hours.” Lan Xichen sighed deeply. “Young master Wei, Wangji cares deeply for you. That much is clear to me.”

“What are you trying to say, Sect leader Lan?”

“I am saying that perhaps, young master Wei, you need to open your eyes and carefully examine your heart, and where Wangji stands.”

Wei Ying didn’t know how to reply to that, but he was saved by Lan Zhan picking his way across the snow. The man made his way to Wei Ying’s side and gently nudged a pair of bottles his way.

Emperor’s Smile.

Somehow, this silent gesture felt heavy with the weight of unsaid words. Lan Xichen had a knowing gleam in his eye that Wei Ying wanted to dissect, but before he could grill Lan Zhan’s brother further, he excused himself, saying that he had a meeting due with Jin Guangyao at the main reception hall. He gave them a meaningful look.

Lan Zhan and Wei Ying followed quietly behind, ducking behind a screen when Lan Xichen sat down opposite Jin Guangyao.

“*Er-ge* . I know this must be a stressful situation, so I’ll keep my time here short.” Jin Guangyao was sympathetic, and Wei Ying’s skin crawled at the look on his face.

“There’s no need, it’s just—” Lan Xichen broke off, and Wei Ying noticed that the quiver in his voice wasn’t quite false. “—Wangji always had a soft spot for young master Wei.”

“Wei Wuxian,” Jin Guangyao corrected. “Has captured disciples and is keeping them in the Demon Slumbering Cave.”

A sharp intake of breath, “When?”

“Just last night.”

Wei Ying rolled his eyes. He was asleep in his bed last night, damn it! Either that, or he was crying his eyes out. He tugged Lan Zhan’s sleeve silently, and the two of them departed quickly on Bichen.

The Burial Mounds was a familiar presence in his mind. They invaded—was it really invading, if they had once been former tenants—his mind, whispering their welcomes, promises and apologies.

Wei Wuxian. Come back. We can help you. Anything you want, and we can help you achieve it. Accept us into you.

Later, Wei Ying says, digging his heels in and straining against the siren call. *Later*.

“Wei Ying?”

“It’s nothing, just...” He tapped his forehead. “Voices. The Burial Mounds talk, sometimes.”

Lan Zhan nodded, and even though Wei Ying could see the concern burning in his eyes, he didn’t pry. They simply walked in silence, heading up to the Demon Slumbering Cave. He could still remember the day Lan Zhan had visited him here, and he had cheerfully explained the meaning behind the name.

That felt like a lifetime ago.

As they approached the cave, the sound of arguing became clearer and clearer, and Wei Ying smiled when he heard the voices of Sizhui, Jin Ling and Zichen. Ah, there was Jingyi too.

A group of about two dozen disciples from varying sects were tied up and seated in the cave, and Jingyi, Sizhui and Jingyi were currently engaged in a very colourful discussion. Wei Ying listened for a few more moments before stepping into the place, purposely making his footsteps louder.

“You! Yiling Patriarch!”

“Yes, yes. Me. Sizhui, how long have you been up here?” Wei Ying muttered absently.

“Today is the second day, Mo—Wei *qianbei* .”

“Hm.” Wei Ying turned to Lan Zhan. “Could you...”

With a few clean swipes, the ropes wrapped around the disciples were cut to tatters, and Jingyi and Sizhui immediately rushed to Wei Ying’s side, peppering him with questions.

Wei Ying felt a little overwhelmed, so he patted the air, hoping they would get the hint. “Alright, alright. Let’s get you back down the mountain, okay? We can talk later.”

“Wei *qianbei* , we knew you’d come.” Sizhui said, and Zichen nodded fervently. Jin Ling was the only one who hadn’t been instantly won over, bless his little heart.

“Are you guys crazy? That’s Wei Wuxian! He’s the one who brought us all here!”

There was a murmuring of assent, and Wei Ying sighed.

“Look, these last few days have been quite stressful for me. I recovered from a stab wound, cried, received some very interesting news, and now I’ve come all the way to Yiling, this is how you repay me? I don’t care if you hate me, but you have to get out of here. You can’t die on my watch.”

“Why?” Jin Ling demanded. “So you can prove yourself?”

“That, and I care about you.”

Jin Ling fell silent, allowing himself to be ushered out of the cave. There seemed to be a roadblock of some kind, and when Wei Ying moved to the front of the cave, he realised the problem immediately.

“Wei Wuxian!” Someone entirely forgettable shook his fist, the first of many cultivators gathered around the cave. “We’ve caught you red handed!”

The only thought that Wei Ying had was: oh gods, not again.

“Jin Ling!”

“*Jiujiu!*”

“*Baba!*”

Slowly, the disciples trickled out of the cave, melting into the ranks of the cultivators, leaving only Wei Ying and Lan Zhan against the world.

The cultivators gathered here were most likely on a rescue mission, and now he was here, the situation had gotten far worse.

“I’m very sorry, but who are you again?” Wei Ying asked sincerely. He’d at least like to know who had vendettas against him; it made second meetings so much less awkward.

“How dare you? My name is Yi Weichun!” He lifted his robes, and Wei Ying grimaced at the sight of prosthetics. “I lost my legs and my family to you at Nightless City!”

Slowly, all the other cultivators started to shout their grievances, but Wei Ying paid them no mind, scanning the heads of the people present. Gusu Lan, Lanling Jin, Yunmeng Jiang, Qinghe Nie... and a few other smaller sects, no doubt looking to jump on the bandwagon.

“—five thousand people!”

“That’s not right.” Wei Ying muttered.

“I beg your pardon?” The man was incredulous, like he had come prepared with a speech detailing how Wei Wuxian was personally responsible for every death at Nightless City. Knowing how cultivators were, he probably did.

“There were only about three thousand people at Nightless City. I didn’t kill all of them, did I? I don’t even know whether to be flattered you think so highly of me or insulted that you think so lowly of the sects.” Wei Ying countered, smiling at the way the man’s face got increasingly redder

“You—!” But before the man could continue, the all too familiar groans of shambling corpses drifted to their ears, and Wei Ying resisted the powerful urge to cringe away when every available pair of eyes zeroed in on Chengqing hanging from his sash.

“It wasn’t me! These corpses aren’t mine!” Wei Ying held up his hands in self defence, which was an exercise in futility in itself. His words held no weight here, rotten through as they were.

“Yiling Patriarch! Call off your corpses!”

Wei Ying sighed; a gusty breath of exasperation. “I already said—”

“My spiritual energy! It’s— it’s sealed!” Another cultivator—Nie, from the colour of the robes—jabbed his finger accusingly at Wei Ying. “This is your master plan, isn’t it?”

From the group of cultivators, cries of alarm rose, as their spiritual energy shut off like a wine jar being sealed; abruptly, with the absence of something sweet in its place. Wei Ying suddenly remembered the array that he had used to keep Wen Ning in place. That could be modified to block the corpses out.

“Everyone!” He raised his voice to be heard. “Get in the cave, there’s an array on the ground that will keep the corpses out!”

“And why should we listen? This could be a trap!” Someone—Su She, Wei Ying remembered vaguely—shouted.

“Aiya—”

“Wei-xiong, we’ll be safe in the cave, right?” Nie Huaisang was the first to move, running into the cave. His voice echoed out a few moments later, “Can anyone else come in here? I don’t know how to activate the array!”

“Go!” Wei Ying shouted, lifting his flute and playing a series of quick, sharp notes. He tapped on his mental bond with Wen Ning, smiling grimly when he received an answering knock in reply.

Wen Ning could move fast if he wanted to, and he got here within seconds, ploughing into the corpses and allowing the last few cultivators to enter the cave. Wei Ying slammed the doors shut and activated the talismans scattered around; most of them were shattered, but

they were still usable. Paired with the array, which thrummed like a beating heart, they should have about half a *shichen*.

Wei Ying turned, resigning himself to the suspicion and stigma that would follow. At least Lan Zhan was beside him.

“What do we do now?” Nie Huaisang wondered, and Wei Ying thought that was a very good question indeed.

Chapter End Notes

So... I discovered that I have been spelling Chenqing wrong this entire time. I want to crawl into a hole and die. Also there were some inconsistencies with the names that I used, which is... ugh. I don't want to go back and correct all the names, but I'm going to have to i _ i

Chapter 30

Chapter Summary

Me: Oh, yeah, I can cover the second burial siege and the lotus pier scene in like, two chapters, it's fine

My brain: Insolent of you, to think that you have control over the plot. You could sooner wrest God from his throne than control the plot

Yeah, so... plot got away from me, and now it's... -waves vaguely-

Wei Ying sat a little farther from the rest of the group, combing through their situation. Outside, the corpses groaned and battered on the array, and he could feel it weakening.

It would last half a shichen, at most. And then... and then what?

He was well aware of the gazes that seared the top of his head, but all of that faded when Lan Zhan pressed closer to him, and the smell of sandalwood almost blocked out the smell of blood.

"Well! You have us right where you want us, Yiling Patriarch. What will you do now? Sacrifice us? Use us as experiments?" Su She sneered.

"Oh please shut up. Don't you find it strange that your spiritual energies were sealed just as those corpses—that were not under my control, by the way—came?"

"No, because it was your doing!" Murmurs of assent followed, and Wei Ying looked at Lan Zhan with dull fatigue.

"What did you guys do together? I'll assume that you didn't eat together, so poison is out."

"Oh! We drank water!" Nie Huaisang suggested, only to immediately quail under the furious looks everyone gave him.

"Are you trying to court death by drinking the water in the Burial Mounds? It must be the air!"

"But the other disciples and I have been sitting up at the top of the mountain for two days, and our spiritual energies aren't sealed." Jin Ling pointed out.

"Why are we even communi—mmph! Mm!"

Wei Ying whipped his head around.

Lan Zhan lowered his hand and turned to him. "Continue."

"Su She, you've been very vocal against me so far. Just now, you were one of the first to accuse me. Then, you were the one who prevented people from going into the cave to seek shelter. And now... well, it's a little suspicious, isn't it?" Wei Ying smiled pleasantly.

The man looked furious, his mouth working against the silencing spell. He turned to Lan Qiren, who simply held his gaze for a long moment before looking away.

"Su She has always been like this, even when he started his own sect based on Gusu Lan's techniques!" A Lan disciple called out.

"Nonsense! Sect leader Su has worked hard to create a new cultivation style, and here you are, slandered our sect leader's hard work!" A Moling Su disciple shouted back, and soon, they were at each other's throats.

"Lan Zhan, what's the history behind this, ah?" Wei Ying leaned closer, smiling apologetically. He had much to learn after thirteen years being dead.

"Su She seceded from Gusu Lan and founded his own sect." Lan Zhan murmured. "He has been making a name for himself recently."

"That's not all! Su She tried to copy Hanguang-jun; even his spiritual instrument is the same!" Jingyi shouted, setting off another angry tirade. "You even played the music wrong!"

Suddenly, the pieces slotted into place.

"Of course! The only thing that all of you did in common was fight the corpses!" Wei Ying got up and started to pace, working out all of the excess energy that had been humming under his skin.

"Think about it: if Moling Su played the battle songs wrong, the only people who can tell are the Gusu Lan cultivators. But because of the enmity between the two sects, no one will believe them!"

"Lies!" Su She shouted, his face going red. "He's trying to sow discord among us!"

"I'm not lying. If you pass your musical sheets to Lan Qiren, he'll be able to verify my claim." Wei Ying glanced at Lan Zhan, wishing that he could teach the communication array spell to him. But there was no need; Lan Zhan seemed to know exactly what he was thinking.

Su She was stuck, Wei Ying could tell. If he passed the music over, he'd be exposed. If he didn't, he'd be immediately considered guilty. The moment Su She made a move, Lan Zhan drew Bichen, and Wei Ying shouted, "Look out!"

Instinctively, Su She's sword shot out, blocking Bichen's attack. His sword sparked, their spiritual energies clashing violently.

Wei Ying smiled triumphantly. "Why, Su She! It seems like you actually have spiritual energy!" He could feel the moment the animosity shifted, its tides turning on Su She.

He noticed it too. His sword flashed, and blood splattered on the array. Su She grinned viciously, a talisman already in his hand. His lips formed words, but the sentence was cut off when the talisman flashed bright blue, and Su She was gone.

“The array! It’s broken!” Nie Huaisang wailed, fluttering his fan. “What do we do?”

“Wen Ning! Hold the corpses off; do not let any of them get through.”

“Understood, young master Wei.”

“Lan Zhan.” Wei Ying turned to Lan Zhan. “There’s something we can do.”

“I will stay with you.” Lan Zhan drew his sword again, and Wei Ying nodded gratefully. He unwrapped the bandages slowly, revealing more and more of his arms. It had gotten worse, the damage spreading up to his elbows. He cut his palm, pulling off his outer robes and painting on his—Lan Zhan’s, Wei Ying thought giddily—inner robes.

The panic ceased when more and more people watched Wei Ying paint on his robes, and when he chanced a glance, Lan Qiren looked to be on the verge of a qi deviation.

Ah, Wei Ying thought with a mild tinge of hysteria. *He must have recognised Lan Zhan’s robes.*

“Wei qianbei, what are you painting?” Jingyi edged forward, interest painted all over his face. “And your arms...”

“Spirit Lure flag. And my arms are fine.” Wei Ying finished off the last stroke with a flourish, channelling just a little resentful energy into his clothes. They smoked and flashed red, and the groaning of the corpses became louder, more frenzied.

“Run. They won’t notice you, the Spirit Lure flag on me will make sure of that.” Wei Ying promised. He could see the moment that the juniors pieced together what he was going to do.

“I’ll help!” Jingyi fumbled at his robes, but Wei Ying waved him off.

“Aiya, you kids... just go! Hanguang-jun will protect me, okay? Trust in him!” Wei Ying patted Sizhui and grimaced when his fingers left tiny grey fingerprints on his pristine white robes. “Go. Be a good boy, Sizhui.”

Sizhui’s face screwed up, but when he spoke, his voice was steady. “Of course, Wei *qianbei*.”

“Young master Wei!” Wen Ning’s voice was panicked. “I can’t hold them back any longer!”

“Let them in, Wen Ning!” Wei Ying took a deep breath and reached for Lan Zhan’s hand. “We’ll deal with them.”

When the first corpses trickled in, they screamed when their senses were drawn to Wei Ying, who played Chenqing to amplify the Spirit Lure flag, completely blocking the rest of the cultivators from the corpses.

“Go!” He spared a single breath to shout at the cultivators, who scattered like headless chickens, all of them streaming for the exit.

Lan Zhan was right there beside him, cutting down the corpses with ease. Wei Ying heard the telltale jingle of the chains around Wen Ning’s limbs, and he smiled, ignoring the numbness crawling up his arms and manifesting in his legs.

Then there was a new cry in the air. Wet, gurgling, but it was unmistakably a cry of war. The blood pool rippled, and corpses crawled out. He heard Wen Ning’s breath hitch, but the bloodied bodies attacked the corpses, and there was no time to think.

Wen Ning was flagging, his attention diverted by the bloodied corpses. They looked familiar to Wei Ying, but he had no idea where he’d seen them before.

"Corpses!" Jingyi shouted. Wei Ying made a mental note to scold them thoroughly later.

"But these are helping us!" Sizhui argued. He stopped when a stooped figure stopped in front of him, and Wei Ying cleared up the last of the corpses before dispelling the talismans on his clothing.

"Sizhui!" Wei Ying shouted, but his legs buckled under his weight. Lan Zhan caught him, drawing out a pouch filled with healing salves that Hua Cheng had given them and opening it.

"Wait, wait." Wei Ying gasped. "We have to... to bow."

"Granny... Fourth Uncle... you're all here. Were you waiting for us?" Wen Ning cried out hoarsely. There was no response from the corpses; Wei Ying suspected they were barely clinging onto life already.

The foremost corpse shuffled forward, and he recognised the bent back and the wrinkles. Granny. She pressed a hand to Sizhui's face, then something else into his palm and stepped back.

Wei Ying bowed alongside Wen Ning, and he whispered, "Thank you."

The bloodied corpses bowed to them, and they crumbled. Wen Ning immediately scrambled for their ashes, scooping them from the ground and heaping them in his palms.

Wordlessly, Jingyi, Sizhui and Zichen knelt too, emptying their herb sachets out and helping Wen Ning to scoop up the ashes. Jin Ling followed soon after, and Wei Ying returned his focus to his legs.

They were now red and raw as well, the skin crumbling away. There was no pain, only a faint tingle. Still, he could barely walk on numbed feet, so he had to lean heavily on Lan Zhan.

"Aiyo, don't worry, the numbness will pass!" Wei Ying grinned, waving off the juniors who crowded him. "Let's go meet the rest of them, okay?"

The rest of the cultivators were grouped at the base of the mountain, close to their piers and when Wei Ying limped into view, all eyes turned on them.

He must look like a sorry sight: bandages wrapped around his arms and legs, his outer robes dusty and his inner robes stained with blood. But he still managed a faint smile and stumbled onto a boat, groaning in relief when he could take the pressure off his feet.

"Wei Wuxian! Where do you think you're going?"

Wei Ying opened one eye lazily. "I just saved your life, and this is how you repay me?"

"Is this your atonement? I will never accept it!" The man was practically fuming, but Wei Ying paid him no mind. He patted Lan Zhan's shoulder on his way into the cabin and curled up on one of the benches, falling asleep immediately.

Lan Zhan cast a silencing talisman around the cabin, pulling Wei Ying onto his lap gently. The man was cold, and he busied himself by passing spiritual energy into Wei Ying, warming him up again. His core was so weak, and the chill that surrounded Wei Ying was at odds with the exuberance that he would always have.

A blindingly bright sun, warm until you pressed closer.

The boats were slowing down, and Lan Zhan leaned down, shaking Wei Ying's shoulders gently.

"Wei Ying."

"Hm?" Wei Ying hummed sleepily, curling closer to Lan Zhan's side. His heart squeezed at that sight.

"We are at Lotus Pier already."

Wei Ying woke slowly, blinking his eyes and looking around. Suddenly, an incandescent smile spread across his face.

"Lan Zhan! Remember when I said I'd bring you around and show you the sights? I never got to do that, so here's our chance."

Lan Zhan would have loved nothing more than to spend a night alone by Wei Ying's side, pampering him and buying anything he expressed a fancy towards, but he held himself back. It would not do to reveal their relationship to him yet.

Wei Ying was not in a good place to say yes, and Lan Zhan was not sure that he could survive if Wei Ying died after his confession.

That is, if Wei Ying would say yes in the first place.

But these thoughts were neither here nor there, and he put them in a dark corner of his mind as he helped Wei Ying out of the boat, staying by his side as they limped to Lotus Pier's

Great Hall.

There, two women were waiting for them; an old woman and another who had a veil draped over her face.

The crowd of cultivators erupted in hushed murmuring yet again, but Lan Zhan was so tired of... all this. This was why the illustrious Hanguang-jun never dabbled in sect politics; it was not, as most people believed, because he was too holy for these matters, but simply because he did not want to.

“What’s all this about?” Jiang Cheng demanded. He was seated on his throne.

The woman with the veil stepped forward and bowed.

“Sect leader Jiang. We have come today to testify against Lianfang-jun, and to expose his crimes.” Her hands lifted, and they hesitated at the edge of her veil for all of a single moment before she whipped it off.

Lan Zhan barely heard the muted gasps, instead choosing to scrutinise her face closely. It was clear that she was once beautiful, but now, long, jagged scar tissue slashed across her face.

“My name is Sisi,” she began, her head held high. “And I was hired to serve Jin Guangshan in his dying days. I was summoned to Golden Carp Tower one day, with twenty other sisters. There was a man, seated behind a curtain. He had a soft voice, and he instructed us to—”

Sisi broke off, taking a deep breath. “—to pleasure him. He said, ‘father, I have brought your favourite women’. Jin Guangshan was weak, and when his heart gave out, I knew what was going to happen.” She clenched her fist and with her other hand, gestured to her face.

“I got lucky. I was only permanently disfigured. The rest of my sisters were killed, and I was locked up until recently, when someone let me out.”

The hall burst into discussions, and Lan Zhan wondered if it was the nature of man to be so easily swayed by a scandalous story. He did not want to dwell long on that, instead turning to the older woman. She seemed familiar, though Lan Zhan knew that he most likely had not met her before.

“I am Qin Su’s personal maid, Bi Cao. I served the madam faithfully for a long time, until I... I discovered a secret.” Bi Cao took a shaky breath. “Lianfang-jun and his wife... they are the paragon of a happy couple, are they not?”

A murmur of assent rippled outwards. Jin Guangyao and Qin Su’s relationship was the envy of the cultivation world, and for it to end so abruptly... well. The cultivation world thrived on the misery of others.

A dam inside Bi Cao seemed to break, and her composure slipped. “Our Lady Su and Lianfang-jun... they are not husband and wife, but brother and sister! My madam was taken advantage of by Jin Guangshan, and he forbade her from telling anyone!”

The hall exploded, and Lan Zhan felt Wei Ying pull him away, into the cool night perfumed by lotus.

“Sorry, I just... I couldn’t listen any longer, you know?” Wei Ying offered him a rueful smile. “I don’t like Jin Guangyao, but the way they all turned on him... at least the heat won’t be on me anymore.”

“Mn,” Lan Zhan said feelingly. That was how the cultivation world worked; just like the tides of the sea. Nothing would remain set in stone.

Wei Ying shook his head. “Ah, nevermind all that. Can I show you around Lotus Pier? We can just be no one, Lan Zhan. Just for tonight.”

Lan Zhan takes his hand and lets Wei Ying pull him towards the glittering lights.

Chapter 31

Chapter Summary

I just wanted to write a perfectly innocent shopping trip, but nooooooooooooo

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Wei Ying was excited to be back, and Lotus Pier was almost the same. No one recognised him, but there was no one that he recognised anyway. Instead, he busied himself with buying Lotus Pier's signature snacks and passing half of them to Lan Zhan.

"Lan Zhan, I gave you these snacks to eat, not to hold onto them. Here, try the tanghulu. I think it's the auntie's daughter that's running this store now." Wei Ying teased, nudging his own stick of candy to his lips.

Lan Zhan leaned forward and swept a strand of hair behind his ear, taking a bite out of the tanghulu. He glanced up at Wei Ying through his eyelashes, and Wei Ying's laughter died in his throat.

Lan Zhan looked sinfully good like this, his lips wrapped around the candy and his eyes clouded, like sunlight through mist.

"Ah, Lan Zhan, let's go over there, over there!" Wei Ying cleared his throat, turning away from the bewitching sight and shoving the rest of the tanghulu into his mouth, using the candy as a distraction.

"Mn."

Wei Ying was sure he could detect a hint of smugness in Lan Zhan's voice, and he made him try spicy lotus seeds as revenge. The faint tint on Lan Zhan's face was incredibly worth it, and Wei Ying laughed himself silly.

Somehow, they ended up at a familiar pavilion, set in the middle of a lotus pond. Wei Ying flopped onto one of the worn seats, savouring the lingering heat from the sunlight.

"Ah, it's been so long since I'm back. Everything feels different, even though it's all pretty much the same, you know?" Wei Ying looked around, and brightened when he noticed a tree. "Oh, Lan Zhan! Did I ever tell you about Jiang Cheng's dogs?"

"You have not."

“Right, so, he had these three dogs before I came here. And I told you I’m terrified of dogs, right? So he had to give up his dogs—Uncle Jiang made him—and he hated me for that. And so, he didn’t let me in when it was night. So I climbed this tree, and *shijie* came for me. She was the one who made us both reconcile.”

“Now, looking at the tree, it doesn’t seem all that high.” Wei Ying climbed it easily, settling into the crook that he had once sat in all those years ago. But now, his legs dangled down the tree, and he grinned down at Lan Zhan.

“Catch me, Lan Zhan!” Wei Ying let go, and for a single, blissful, cathartic moment, he thought his spine would fracture, and the back of his head would be crushed to jelly. He’d black out, and then that would be the end.

Warm arms caught him, and those horrible thoughts were swept away by the smell of sandalwood. Wei Ying looked at Lan Zhan, and he smiled. He would never land painfully if Lan Zhan was around.

“There’s one more place I’d like to go, if that’s alright with you?”

Lan Zhan merely nodded, trailing behind Wei Ying like a ghost.

The Jiang ancestral hall had three new tablets. Jiang Yanli, Jiang Fengmian and Yu Ziyuan.

Wei Ying knelt, the smell of incense clogging his throat. He heard Lan Zhan’s robes rustle for a moment, then he gracefully knelt.

“Lan Zhan...”

“I will bow,” Lan Zhan said, with the same damning finality he had used when he objected to Wei Ying practically throwing himself into a volcano.

They bowed twice, and Wei Ying couldn’t help but wonder if they were going to bow a third time.

Next time, Uncle Jiang, Madam Yu, he said silently. Let the two bows we just did count as prostrating to the Heavens and the Earth, and to the Father and the Mother. Please help me reserve the person beside me for now. I’ll owe you the last prostrate for now, and find some chance to come back and finish our bows.

At this point, a cold laugh suddenly came from behind the two. Wei Ying’s skin crawled; he had never expected Jiang Cheng to sound so cruel. He turned around to see Jiang Cheng standing in the middle of a clearing outside of the ancestral hall, his arms folded.

His voice was cold and callous. “Wei Wuxian, you really see yourself as an outsider, do you? You come and leave whenever you want. You take with you whomever you want. Do you still remember whose sect this is? Who’s the owner?”

Wei Ying had originally wanted to keep away from Jiang Cheng in the first place. Now that he discovered them, he knew they’d definitely be faced with some vicious remarks. But he didn’t want to argue. Still, he had a bad feeling about this.

“I didn’t take Hanguang-jun to the other more confidential places of Lotus Pier. We only came to greet Uncle Jiang and Madam Yu with a few sticks of incense. We’re finished already and we’ll be leaving now.”

“If you’re leaving, please go as far as possible. Don’t let me see or hear you fooling around in Lotus Pier again.”

Wei Ying felt his eye twitch. He saw Lan Zhan’s hand stray towards his sword and stopped him at once.

Lan Zhan turned to Jiang Cheng. His expression looked like it had been carved from ice.

“Watch your words.”

Jiang Cheng looked pleased that he had gotten a reaction out of Lan Zhan. “I think you’re the ones who should watch your actions.”

The ominous feeling grew within Wei Ying. He spoke to Lan Zhan softly, “Hanguang-jun, let’s go.”

He then turned around and bowed one more time before the Jiang couple’s tablets before standing up with Lan Zhan. Jiang Cheng didn’t stop him from prostrating, but he didn’t hide his mocking tone either.

“You really should kneel for them properly, having dirtied their eyes and contaminated their peace with your presence.”

Wei Ying threw him a sideways glance, speaking in a calm voice. “I’m only here to burn some incense. That’s enough, isn’t it?”

“Burn some incense? Wei Wuxian, are you really that stupid? It’s been so long since you were kicked out of our sect, and here you are bringing unwelcome people with you to burn incense for my parents?”

Wei Ying was already about to step around him and leave. When he heard this, he suddenly stopped. He could feel the resentful energy prickling at his arms and legs, and he took a few breaths before responding in an even voice.

“Well, say it out loud. Who’s an unwelcome person? And I came to apologise.”

If he were alone here, he’d be able to pretend like he heard nothing of what Jiang Cheng said. It’s not like Madam Yu had never said these things to him before. However, with Lan Zhan with him, no matter what, he wouldn’t want Lan Zhan to suffer through Jiang Cheng’s vulgar remarks and obvious malice alongside him.

He didn’t deserve it.

Jiang Cheng laughed mockingly. “Look how forgetful you are. Who is an unwelcome person? Alright, let me remind you. It was because you played the hero and saved Hanguang-jun, who’s standing beside you right now, that the entire Lotus Pier and my parents went

down with you. And that wasn't enough. You even had to save Wen dogs and drag my sister down with you. What a person you are! What's more, you're even so generous as to take the two to Lotus Pier. The Wen dogs strolled in front of my sect's gates; Second Young Master Lan came here to burn incense. You're here on purpose to remind me, to remind them."

Wei Ying couldn't breathe. Was that what Jiang Cheng thought he was doing? Taunting him? Was he not aware of how much agony Wei Ying had been in when he woke up and realised that he was alive, and his entire family was dead.

Unaware of Wei Ying's inner turmoil, Jiang Cheng continued. "Wei Wuxian, who do you think you are? Who gave you the face to take whomever you want into our sect's ancestral hall? And an apology? Don't make me laugh; what are you trying to apologise for?"

Wei Ying had known that Jiang Cheng had to settle this with him no matter what. Better now than never, he supposed. He had tried to prepare himself for it. He knew it'd hurt, of course. But it could never compare to the way his brother hurled words at him like they were weapons, and he forced himself to stand there and take it.

Not only did Jiang Cheng think that Wei Wuxian was responsible for Lotus Pier's destruction, but also that Wen Ning and Lan Zhan were responsible too. He wouldn't glance at the three of them, let alone when they were walking right in front of his face at the same time inside Lotus Pier. He was probably infuriated.

When Jiang Cheng accused him, Wei Wuxian couldn't defend himself at all, but he just couldn't take it when such poisonous words were being directed at Lan Zhan.

"Jiang Cheng, just listen to yourself. What are you saying? Is this appropriate? Don't forget who you are. After all, you're the leader of a sect. Insulting a renowned cultivator in front of Uncle Jiang and Madam Yu's spirits—where is your self control?" Wei Ying snapped back.

His original intention was to remind Jiang Cheng to at least hold some respect for Lan Zhan. However, Jiang Cheng had always been sensitive. From those words, he probably managed to twist it into the notion that he wasn't fit to be a sect leader.

Immediately, his expression darkened, and he bore an eerie similarity to how Madam Yu looked when she was angry. His voice was harsh and grating. Wei Ying shuddered, taking a few steps back.

"Who's the one insulting my parents in front of their spirits now?! Could you two please understand whose sect you're in? I don't care if you act so shamelessly outside, but don't you dare fool around inside our ancestral hall, before my parents' spirits! After all, they were the ones who brought you up—even I feel ashamed for you!"

Wei Ying never expected these words to come from Jiang Cheng. He recoiled, both shocked and furious and he blurted out, "Shut up!"

Jiang Cheng pointed outside. "Mess around outside however you want, whether under a tree or on a boat, hugging or otherwise! Get out of my sect, get out of my sight!"

Hearing him mention them under a tree, Wei Ying felt his heart skip a beat—could Jiang Cheng have seen the scene where he crashed into Lan Zhan’s arms?

Wei Ying was struggling to hold himself back at this point—Jiang Cheng did always seem to have this effect on him. “Jiang Wanyin, you... apologise right now.”

Jiang Cheng laughed mockingly. “Apologise? For what? For exposing your feelings to each other?”

Wei Ying was beyond angry now. “Hanguang-jun is only my friend—who do you think we are?! I’m warning you. Apologise right now—don’t make me beat you up!”

Jiang Cheng laughed. “Well then, I’ve never seen friends like that before! Warn me? What are you going to do? If you two had the slightest trace of integrity left, you shouldn’t have come here and...”

Seeing the change in Lan Zhan’s expression, Wei Ying felt so angry that his entire body was shaking. He didn’t dare think about what Lan Zhan would think after being shamed like this. He saw red when he heard Jiang Cheng accuse them of having no dignity.

“Have you had enough yet?” Wei Ying roared, and the resentful energy roared alongside him. He tossed a talisman towards Jiang Cheng. The talisman was both fast and powerful. It exploded when it made contact with Jiang Cheng’s right shoulder, causing him to stagger backwards. Jiang Cheng didn’t expect Wei Ying to attack so suddenly.

His spiritual powers hadn’t recovered completely yet, so the talisman hit its intended target. Blood seeped from his shoulder as disbelief flashed across his face. Zidian immediately unravelled from his fingers, lashing out with sizzling light. Lan Zhan unsheathed Bichen to block the attack, and the three began to fight inside the ancestral hall.

Jiang Cheng’s voice was as wild as the look in his eyes. “Very well! A fight it is, then! You think I’m scared?!”

Yet, as he fended off a couple of attacks, Wei Ying suddenly came to, the voices falling silent for a split second. This was the Yunmeng Jiang Sect’s ancestral hall. Just a short while ago, he was kneeling here, asking for the Jiang couple’s blessings, yet now he was attacking their son with Lan Zhan, right in front of their eyes!

As though he had been dunked into the cold springs in Cloud Recesses, he stopped dead. His vision flickered between light and dark.

Jiang Cheng’s expression changed as well. He stopped his whip, his eyes gleaming with caution.

“Wei Ying!” Lan Zhan’s voice rang within Wei Ying’s ears, and—oh, voices weren’t supposed to echo, were they?

Wei Ying was starting to wonder if something happened to his ears. “What’s wrong?” He managed, and those two words took more out of him than the golden core transfer, both

literally and metaphorically.

He felt something trickle down his chin, and he reached up. His hand came away red. Accompanied by throbs of dizziness, blood continued to drip down his nose and his mouth, onto the ground.

He staggered, his legs prickling uncomfortably. Every step sent a dull flare of pain through his bones, and he gasped, the taste of iron flooding his mouth.

“Young master Wei!” Oh, good. Now Wen Ning was here too. Oh, Jiang Cheng was going to be so mad.

“Lan Zhan... Dice. Dice... pocket.” Wei Ying whispered. His voice couldn’t seem to raise beyond a whisper, and his hands wouldn’t cooperate, flopping uselessly. But Lan Zhan pulled out the dice, and his brows furrowed, no doubt thinking of the rule that forbade gambling.

Wei Ying paid him no mind, forcing himself to pick up the die and toss it. It clattered once, twice, then red light seeped through Wei Ying’s half lidded eyelids, and he was no more.

Hua Cheng had been in the main room, listening to some of the complaints of the ghosts. Boring work. But then, a portal appeared, and three figures tumbled out, along with a fourth person that was so obviously dead, even though his eyes remained clear.

Hua Cheng rose to his feet, and the ghosts scrambled out of the halls, realising that their time was over. He was about to greet them, but then his eye caught on Wei Ying, and he shouted for the physician—and tell her to come quickly, it was an emergency.

Wei Ying was alive. He wasn’t supposed to be bleeding from his nose and mouth, his lips and skin slate grey.

“Please,” the man, whom Hua Cheng remembered was called Lan Wangji, bowed. “Save Wei Ying.”

“I’ll save him, but you can’t be here. I’ll send you a letter when Wei Ying comes back—”

“No.” Lan Wangji straightened, his stoic mask cracked, revealing fear and love—so much love for him. “I will stay. That is non-negotiable.”

Hua Cheng opened his mouth to decline, but then the physician was here, and then the ghost was shouting at the servants to get this man to the guest bedroom, and to bring hot, sweet drinks every half shichen, and Lan Wangji was swept along, his grip on Wei Ying resolute.

Hua Cheng signalled for a few ghosts to come and escort the corpse and the man in purple—Sect leader Jiang—to comfortable quarters first, ignoring Sect Leader Jiang’s demands to know what kind of dark magic Wei Wuxian was dabbling in now.

Xie Lian joined him, looking slightly frazzled at all of the ruckus but still serene as ever.

“Gege. This was... not how I expected their reunion to go.” Hua Cheng sighed. “What did Wei Ying do this time?”

“Nothing, for once. The resentful energy just got the better of him. But he does have such self sacrificial tendencies.” Xie Lian observed lightly. “Lan Wangji must be worried out of his mind.”

“That he must be.” Hua Cheng took Xie Lian’s hand, walking slowly to the guest room that had, at one point, stopped being an empty room and started becoming Wei Ying’s.

The physician was waiting for him, and she bowed when Hua Cheng drew near.

“Hua *Chengzhu* . The patient is stable, and I have prescribed him strict bedrest and plenty of fluids. Unfortunately, nothing can be done for the curse; I am not experienced in matters of demonic cultivation, even if I am familiar with his condition.”

“Physician Wen, I know you are waiting for someone, are you not?” Xie Lian asked. “A brother, if I am not mistaken.”

The doctor hesitated before nodding. Her expression was hidden behind the fiery, feathered mask that she wore, but Hua Cheng could see hope and fatigue, and the way it lined her shoulders like a leaden cloak.

“He is waiting in the north wing.” Hua Cheng supplied. “Will you stay after seeing him?”

Physician Wen seemed to be carefully considering her answer. When she replied, her voice was even as ever.

“This one does not know yet, Hua *Chengzhu* . But if you permit, this one will serve you until you deem my service complete.”

“You may stay as long as you wish, Physician Wen.”

She bowed, turning and heading off to the north wing. Xie Lian and Hua Cheng watched her go.

“Do you think Wei Ying knows?” Xie Lian hummed. “She really is the best doctor in the world. I wonder why she doesn’t want to enter the reincarnation cycle.”

“That is for Physician Wen to disclose, gege.”

“I know, I know.”

God and ghost shared a secret smile; they of all people knew what it meant to go against the natural cycle for the people they loved.

“Perhaps Wei Ying should give her some closure, when he wakes.”

Chapter End Notes

Guess who's Physician Wen? ;D

Chapter 32

Chapter Summary

short chapter, but here you go, guys! The golden core reveal kinda... ran away from me a little, but I think it matches the mood, don't you think?

I will be publishing a short fic in the same series, from Jiang Cheng's POV. All the side fics will be released at the same time as their corresponding chapters, so if you've caught up with this book, you're good to read the rest of the side fics!

Wei Ying's senses came to him slowly. The sound of a rhythmic grinding attached itself to his senses first, then the quiet, almost imperceptible sounds of a guqin's strings being plucked. The smell of herbs followed soon, and the feel of silken sheets on his raw skin.

A groan bubbled from his throat when he tried to shift himself on the bed.

"You're awake." The grinding stopped, and the pestle was set aside, the mortar brought to his lips. "Drink."

Wei Ying did, even if he did whine at the bitterness of the medicine. This doctor was different from the one that had treated him when he was a ghost. He couldn't place it, but the hands that stripped his bandages and reapplied the salve were kind and steady and familiar.

"Wen Qing," Wei Ying croaked. The hands on his stomach stilled. "Wen Qing, Wen Ning, he —"

"Shhh, I know. I know. Rest."

There was a slight prick on his neck, and Wei Ying slipped back under.

"Wen Qing, I'm so sorry, I'm so—"

"There is no need for apologies."

"—his condition?"

"I'm not sure, Hua *Chengzhu* . By all means, he should be able to move already. Something else is interfering."

"—Wen! Some—"

Another merciful spell of darkness.

“There is a way. I can—”

“—dangerous, Hanguang-jun. You could—”

“—for Wei Ying.”

Wei Ying slept again.

Guqin notes floated towards him, sweet and light, and Wei Ying felt his muscles relax slowly, until he was completely pliant. Warmth wrapped around his wrist, and he wished so desperately to be able to feel, to see, to smell something, anything. But he was simply trapped.

Was this how it felt to be trapped in a rotting corpse? Was this what had happened to him; forced to be in purgatory for his sins? His consciousness intact, forced to bear witness as his body rotted away? He would rather jump into Mount Tonglu. He’d rather go back to the Burial Mounds again. He’d rather—

“Wei Ying.”

Sensation burst across his skin, and he gasped, his throat scratched raw and tingling like he’d been screaming for hours. His fingers twitched, and he blinked, the dim light helping him to adjust quicker.

Lan Zhan was slumped over his guqin, his fingers hovering over the strings like he still wanted to play. Blood dripped from his fingers, and Wei Ying could barely feel his spiritual energy. What kind of song had drained him to this extent?

“Lan Zhan!” Wei Ying rushed to his side, tripping out of the bed and reaching out to move him away from the strings. His hand fell through Lan Zhan’s shoulder, and he froze.

Slowly, painfully slowly, he turned his head to the bed, where a body lay.

His body was tucked under a quilt and arranged so it was as though he was sleeping. He would have believed that illusion, save for the bandages that covered every inch of his skin and his cracked, chapped lips.

He was dead.

Panic seized him, and it was like he was five, and he had fallen into the lotus lake and he was flailing and water was flooding his mouth—

“Breathe. Wei Wuxian, you’re okay. We can fix this.” Wen Qing’s voice cut through the suffocating darkness, and he struggled to fill his lungs with air. Each breath cleared the darkness somewhat, and he wriggled, trying to get to Lan Zhan’s side.

“Wei Wuxian. Don’t move around so much; we just managed to get your soul out of your body before you self-destructed.”

“Self-destructed?” Wei Ying croaked. “I thought I had more time.”

Wen Qing was silent for a long time. “We all did. Hanguang-jun pulled you out of your body with a spell that he made—dangerous, immature, desperate—but a spell, nonetheless.”

“How long was I out?”

“About three days.”

“Three—” Wei Ying groaned quietly. “Three days?”

“Be grateful it wasn’t more, your Hanguang-jun here made sure of that.”

“I don’t—wait, *my* Hanguang-jun? I don’t know what you’re—”

“Physician Wen, who are you speaking to?” Lan Zhan’s voice was so fragile, and both ghosts turned to look at him. Wen Qing clucked her tongue when she caught sight of his hands, moving over to clean them up.

“Congratulations, Hanguang-jun. You managed to pull your stupid idea off.” Wen Qing deadpanned, and the tone she used was so similar to when she shot down his idea for potatoes that he almost burst into tears right there and then.

“I don’t...” Lan Zhan trailed off uncertainly, his eyes slowly roaming the room. His gaze slipped over Wei Ying, and he felt his heart drop.

“I don’t see Wei Ying.”

Something was wrong.

Lan Zhan stood up, readying his bleeding fingers as though he was about to play again. Wei Ying’s heart leapt into his throat, and he lunged forward, dragging his hands across the strings.

A loud, dissonant twang echoed in the room, and Wei Ying watched Lan Zhan’s eyes widen imperceptibly.

“Wei Ying,” he whispered, horror clear on his face. “I killed you. I... oh.”

His expression crumpled, and no matter how much Wei Ying plucked at the strings, Lan Zhan was unresponsive, staring straight at the body still lying on the bed.

“Lan Zhan, Lan Zhan please,” Wei Ying begged, reaching out to brush his fingers across Lan Zhan’s cheek. “Please come back to me.”

Unbidden, he plucked at the strings, his hands moving as though it was merely muscle memory. The tune was melancholic and nostalgic, and Wei Ying looked up at Lan Zhan

desperately.

He was crying. Hanguang-jun, made of carved jade and moonlight, was crying. He looked back helplessly at Wen Qing, who pursed her lips and left the room.

“Hanguang-jun, Lan Wangji, Lan *er-gege*, Lan Zhan, please don’t cry, okay? Please, you’re breaking my heart, ah. I won’t leave you again...” Wei Ying murmured, playing the song over and over again.

"Wei Ying." Lan Zhan reached out, waving his hands slowly until one of them brushed against his cheek. Wei Ying frantically strummed a note, and Lan Zhan paused.

"This is unexpected." Hua Cheng swept into the room, Wen Qing following close behind. "Well, Lan Wangji, do you count this as a success in your books?"

Lan Zhan closed his eyes, his hand trembling where he cupped Wei Ying's cheek.

"No," he whispered hoarsely. "No, this is a resounding failure. But I could not bear to watch as—as Wei Ying rotted in front of my eyes."

"I understand, Lan Wangji, but next time, do exercise caution with your *zhiji's* body." Hua Cheng said, not unkindly. He gathered pure energy in his palm and sent it outwards in a storm of butterflies, which gathered around Wei Ying.

Wei Ying felt himself solidify, his hands and feet flickering into existence. The warmth of Lan Zhan’s hand felt real on his cheek, and he could feel how the guqin strings were damp beneath his touch.

He barely had time to react before he was pulled to Lan Zhan’s chest, and he was squeezed so tightly that he couldn’t breathe—even though he was a ghost, and he had no need for that anymore.

The thought sent a giddy rush through him. He was dead.

It didn’t seem as appealing as all those times that he had fantasised about dying. But it wasn’t like the first time, either. This time, it felt a little like slipping into a comfortable cloak.

“Can you stand?” Wen Qing asked.

Wei Ying nodded numbly and allowed Wen Qing to pry him from Lan Zhan’s hold, submitting to the tests that Wen Qing ran on him. Follow her finger from left to right, open his mouth, check his hands and legs.

Finally, after much prodding and poking, Wen Qing declared him fit to be released from bedrest.

“Now get out. I need to go to Hanguang-jun.” Wen Qing shoved him and Hua Cheng out of the room, shutting the door firmly behind her.

“How... how long has Wen Qing been here?”

Hua Cheng smiled, gesturing for Wei Ying to follow him. “A little before you died. But you must understand: her soul was fractured when she arrived, so she only gained consciousness after you fell into Mount Tonglu. She’s a great doctor.”

“She is, she is.” Wei Ying murmured. He was forgetting something, but what was it...?

“Well, we’re here.” The doors swung open before Hua Cheng, and Wei Ying suddenly remembered what he had forgotten.

“Wei Wuxian!”

Right. Jiang Cheng had come through the portal too, hadn’t he?

He flinched, half expecting Zidian to come slashing through the air, but nothing touched him. He was fine.

Hua Cheng laid a hand on his shoulder. “Talk,” he said. “I promise once you figure all this out, it’ll be better.”

And with that, the doors shut behind Hua Cheng, leaving Wei Ying in a room with Wen Ning and Jiang Cheng.

“Before we start tearing each other’s throats out, can I ask you something, Jiang Cheng?” Wei Ying took a deep breath. “Did I imagine *shijie* ? That night, when you...”

An emotion flickered across Jiang Cheng’s face. Fear? Regret? It was gone as quickly as it came.

“No,” he said begrudgingly. “Shijie was there, for a split second. She told me some things.”

“What kind of things?” Wei Ying asked delicately.

The scowl was back on Jiang Cheng’s face, and it was almost a relief to see it again. “That’s for me to ask you, jackass. We’re going to lay everything out on the table today, you hear me? If I catch you lying, I’ll bring you back to life and break both of your legs.”

“Sect Leader Jiang, since we’re laying out all we know on the table, then...” Wen Ning opened his mouth again, but Wei Ying glared at him.

“Wen Ning!”

“Young master Wei.” Wen Ning pulled out Suibian and laid it on the table. “Sect Leader Jiang deserves to know.”

“No. No! I refuse.”

“Refuse what?” Jiang Cheng looked intrigued, which was not a good sign.

“Forgive us, Sect leader Jiang.” Wen Ning bowed to Jiang Cheng and pulled out Suibian, laying it on the table. “Please do not be alarmed when we reveal the truth.”

“Wen Ning!” Wei Ying was about to say more, but his words seemed to dive back down into his throat, and he struggled with the familiar sensation.

“Wei Ying. Let Wen Ning speak.” Lan Zhan swept in, and Wei Ying wanted to faint, right there and then. Lan Zhan couldn’t know of this either! His fingers had been wrapped up, and Wen Qing trailed silently behind him.

“Thank you, Hanguang-jun.” Wen Ning bowed, turning back to Jiang Cheng.

No. Not like this. Jiang Cheng couldn’t—he couldn’t. He was supposed to live a long and fruitful life without ever finding out what Wei Ying had to do for him.

But Wen Ning came along with Suibian, and now his carefully constructed house of lies was crumbling around his ears. Lan Zhan had silenced him, and Wei Ying could do nothing as Wen Ning carefully narrated the tale to Jiang Cheng.

Jiang Cheng's expression remained neutral until it reached the part where Wen Ning mentioned that Wei Ying had Wen Qing carve his golden core out. His dantian throbbed as he relieved those two nights and the last day when his golden core was extracted, glimmering like a miniature sun in the sunrise.

Jiang Cheng looked horrified and pissed off at the same time. He turned to Wei Ying, who recoiled violently.

“You! Why did you do that?”

“I—” Wei Ying wet his lips nervously, realising that the silencing spell had worn off. “I didn’t want to see you suffer. You were so lost without a golden core, and I... I couldn’t bear to see you like that.”

Jiang Cheng slammed his hand onto the table, Zidian sparking dangerously on his hand.

“Wei Wuxian, you—” Jiang Cheng hissed, storming up to Wei Ying. “—are the world’s biggest fucking idiot! Are you kidding me? You took Yunmeng Jiang’s motto and ran with it, huh?”

“I didn’t—”

“Shut the fuck up.” Then Jiang Cheng hugged him.

Wei Ying froze.

What. This wasn’t—he hadn’t foreseen this. Jiang Cheng was supposed to hit him, and Wei Ying would laugh it off and they’d go their separate ways.

“I hate you,” Jiang Cheng croaked. “You piss me off so much. A golden core transfer, Wei Wuxian? Really?”

“It was the only way.” Wei Ying said gently. “Don’t cry, Chengcheng.”

Jiang Cheng laughed, but the sound was weak and watery. “I still haven’t forgiven you for dying on me when you said we’d be the Twin Prides of Yunmeng.”

“So you forgive me for anything else? Like that time I stole—”

Jiang Cheng punched him, but the hit was half hearted and barely hurt. “I will push you into a lotus lake.”

Wei Ying smiled, so wide he felt his cheeks hurting.

“I look forward to that.”

Chapter 33

Chapter Summary

If you know where I got the inspiration for automatons from, I would love to hear your thoughts about it (spoiler: it's from another danmei)

Ahem, anyway, THAT scene is coming up. You know the one. Get ready.

EDIT: I AM GOING TO CRAWL INTO A HOLE AND DIEEEEEEE I MADE A MISTAKE BECAUSE I WAS TOO BUSY THINKING ABOUT THE NEXT SCENE
HNHHNHNGNFNGN

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“What are you going to do now?”

Wei Ying looked at Xie Lian, who had come into the room sometime after Jiang Cheng’s emotional outburst.

“Yunping City.”

Jiang Cheng frowned, now standing a healthy distance from Wei Ying. “That’s in Yunmeng territory. What are you going to do there?”

“Aiya, Jiang Cheng! I didn’t know you cared!”

“Shut up!” Jiang Cheng bowed to Xie Lian and turned to Wei Ying, jabbing his finger into his chest. “Wei Wuxian, if I find you in Yunping messing around, I’ll kill you. You’d better not do anything stupid, you hear me?”

“Got it, got it. Run along now, Sect Leader Jiang. You have Lotus Pier to run all alone.”

“And who’s fault is that?” Jiang Cheng groused. Wei Ying felt a twinge of hurt, but he masked it well. This was just Jiang Cheng’s way of working through his emotions. When he truly got hurt, he’d hide the cause deep in his heart, where it would fester and reemerge as anger.

By bringing the topic up in conversations, it was a silent forgiveness; it was okay to talk about these things now.

“Now that your destination is figured out, San Lang has something to show you.” Xie Lian glanced behind him. “You can come out now.”

Wei Ying looked at the spirit practically trying to become Xie Lian's shadow, with how close it was pressing to the god's back. It looked to be about his height, with wide, pale eyes and a timid posture.

Xie Lian gestured at the ghost. "This is Mo Xuanyu, the former owner of your body. He wasn't hard to find; he got lost on the way to the reincarnation cycle, and San Lang merely called him back."

"I didn't get lost, I... I didn't want to go." Mo Xuanyu quailed when Wei Ying glanced at him, hiding behind Xie Lian's back. "I- I mean, yes! I got lost, while erm...I-"

"My name is Wei Ying, courtesy name Wei Wuxian!" Wei Ying stuck out his hand, ignoring the ghost's flabbergasted expression. "But you probably know me as the Yiling Patriarch, hm?"

"Yi-Yiling Patriarch? What are you doing here? I- I gave you my body! Please don't kill me or anything, you can keep my body!"

"Ah, but I don't want to!" Wei Ying looped his arm through Mo Xuanyu's and pulled him away from Xie Lian, who looked amused. Lan Zhan did too, in the slight raise of his eyebrows. Mo Xuanyu looked as though he was about to faint.

"W-what does young master Wei mean...?"

Wei Ying frowned. "Well... Think of it this way: your body isn't compatible with my soul, since I've uh... been through stuff. But don't worry! I'll solve all your problems for you! If you agree to take this body back, I'm sure Hua *qianbei* will have something for you to do."

"You... want me to stay. In the Ghost City. Here."

"Yes. That's what I said, right? Yeah, I did say that. Also, your technique for that soul exchange spell...aiya, don't look so scared! You got one of my manuscripts that were supposedly only theories. So I'll need to ask you about the ritual."

Mo Xuanyu took a step back, but Wei Ying matched his pace until he had cornered Mo Xuanyu against Hua Cheng's chest. He knew his eye had 'that mad inventor gleam', as Wen Qing so aptly put it.

"Young master Wei..." Mo Xuanyu gulped, his eyes darting side to side.

"Come with me. I have a workshop where we can talk." Wei Ying grinned, and it must seem strange to Mo Xuanyu, who looked like he had been told to eat only rocks for the rest of his life.

"Young master Wei..."

"I know what you're thinking. Don't worry, once I leave your body, the changes to your face shouldn't be permanent. The soul exchange will change the vessel to fit the soul. Plus, I'm sure Wen Qing can fix the body now that I'm gone." Wei Ying watched as Mo Xuanyu slumped in relief. Really, this boy was so easy to please.

But first...

“Xuanyu—can I call you Xuanyu?—I need to ask you something very important. Do you want to come back to life?” Wei Ying asked softly. “I know you couldn’t ask me because I wasn’t, you know, conscious, and you didn’t know how to, but I’m asking you now: do you want a second chance?”

Mo Xuanyu looked surprised. Most likely, no one had ever asked him what he wanted. Wei Ying’s heart ached for him; he would treat Mo Xuanyu well, even if he chose to remain a ghost. It was the least he could do for the timid man.

“Yes. Yes, I want to live again.” Mo Xuanyu whispered. “Thank you, Yiling Patriarch.”

"There's no need for thanks. I'm just returning what really belongs to you." Wei Ying waved away his words. “I’ll help you after I come back. Hanguang-jun and I have to deal with something really quick. Xie *da-ge*, is my workshop still around?”

As it turned out, Wei Ying’s workshop was practically untouched. There was not a single mote of dust, and when Wei Ying turned to Xie Lian, the god had simply shrugged and smiled.

“We had faith in your return.”

Lan Zhan was looking around curiously, but Wei Ying went straight for what he needed; a set of talismans that he had been toying around for a while now. They were prototypes, but for this time, it would be fine.

“Where did I... ah!”

“Wei Ying?”

“I’m looking for a... uh, how do I put this? Years ago, I found this person’s works. They knew how to make automatons from cheap ingredients, so you could imagine what I did with them. I messed around and made a body, but it was a prototype. Ah, here it is!”

Wei Ying lifted a life size mannequin out of the chair that it had been seated in, checking over the joints and making sure that there were no tears.

“Still in good condition! Good, I can use this.” Wei Ying laid out the doll, arranging its limbs so that it looked as though it was sleeping. Carefully, he painted the sigils for illusion and protection on the rice paper skin, and drew the lines for a summoning array around it.

“Will this work?” Lan Zhan asked anxiously. They had decided that Wei Ying shouldn’t walk around as a ghost, since his soul was still a little scattered. This was the closest thing that Wei Ying could think of that didn’t involve blood, an innocent person and way too much trauma for the living person involved.

“Well, we’ll just have to find out, won’t we?” Wei Ying took a deep breath and activated the array. Surprisingly, the resentful energy seemed to come from somewhere deep inside him,

like a hidden well of power. The array pulsed once, twice, and then he was lying on the floor, blinking up at the ceiling.

“Wei Ying?”

“Hold on a moment, Lan Zhan.” Wei Ying murmured. “Still trying to get used to having a body.”

His fingers flexed easily, the machinery under the cloth skin moving smoothly. The fine machinery had been something that had been irking Wei Ying, until he took matters into his own hands and forged them himself, inlaying spells into them.

“Lan Zhan! Do I look like myself now?” Wei Ying got up, pleased that he felt so light. The machinery had been chosen to be as light as possible, and the weight most likely came from the copper gears. The bones were made from bamboo, and he could feel his soul expanding, filling in the gaps between the cloth and the bamboo sticks and flushing him with warmth.

“Wei Ying needs to put on some clothes first.” Lan Zhan’s eyes were focused pointedly on the floor, and Wei Ying grinned gleefully.

“Aiya, Lan Zhan, I can deal with that soon enough. Now tell me, does my face look okay?”

Lan Zhan’s eyes flicked upwards before focusing back on the floor, His throat bobbed slightly.

“Acceptable.”

There was a new temple in Yunping, and it was unexpectedly famous. Wei Ying didn’t even have to enter to sense the array that the temple had, and from the looks of it, Lan Zhan did too.

“We can come back here at night, right?” Wei Ying murmured. It was strange, having an illusion speak for him. The mannequin didn’t have an actual face, merely a blank slate, but the illusion was layered on top, so it allowed Wei Ying to speak without actually opening his mouth.

“Mn. We should rest.”

They booked an inn nearby, and Wei Ying ignored his fluttering heart when Lan Zhan booked one room for the two of them.

“Ah, Lady Boss, could you bring food for the two of us and the strongest wine that you have?” Wei Ying ran to their room first, and Lan Zhan stepped in a while later.

“Of course, young masters!”

Wei Ying busied himself refreshing the wards that he had placed on himself, feeling the cloth and sticks buzz with charged energy.

It felt strange, channelling energy without having to draw it through his spiritual veins. He felt like he was wearing a pair of comfortable robes, after wearing one that was too small for him. Perhaps Tonglu had affected him in some way, after all.

“Wei Ying. Did you sense any disturbance at the Guanyin Temple?”

“Ah? No, but I did smell smoke. Something bad happened there, I can feel it. The array is blocking me, but if I took it down, I know there would have been resentful energy there.”

They fell silent when the lady boss walked in, a tray full of steaming and spiced foods. His heart warmed. Ah, so Lan Zhan had...

“Excuse me, Lady Boss, do you know anything about the Guanyin Temple in town?”

“That temple? What would you like to know, young masters?”

“The history of it, perhaps? We’re tourists from far away, you see, and the temple looked rather big.”

The woman nodded her head understandingly. “Ah, so you two are travelling together? The temple was erected recently, and it’s a famous tourist spot; many people journey from all around to pray there. But there are... unsavoury rumours about its origins.”

“Oh?” Wei Ying leaned closer. “Like what?”

The woman lowered her voice, as though being caught talking about a temple would spell her doom. “People say a courtesan house once stood there, but it was burnt down. Sometimes, I heard that if you go there after hours, you can hear the sounds of merrymaking.” She smiled. “But that’s just a rumour, young masters. Enjoy your meal, and I hope you have a lovely honeymoon. The two of you are a beautiful couple.”

The lady left, leaving Wei Ying’s jaw hanging. Lan Zhan looked unaffected, save for his blushing ears.

“Did she- did she just congratulate us on our wedding?”

“Mn.”

“Don’t! You can’t just say ‘Mn’ to everything, Hanguang-jun! We’re just friends!”

“Friends.” Lan Zhan repeated.

“Yes! Anyway, sit down, eat, eat. We need strength for the upcoming events, I can feel it in my bones.” Wei Ying poured out a generous cup of alcohol for himself before realising that he could not drink it. After a moment’s hesitation, Wei Ying slid it over to Lan Zhan’s side.

Wei Ying didn’t think that Lan Zhan would actually drink the alcohol, but he was surprised yet again. Lan Zhan raised the cup to his lips and downed the contents. Was he distracted?

Just as he predicted, Lan Zhan's eyes fluttered shut, and his head drooped onto his chest. Wei Ying lifted the cup and sniffed. Oh, yeah, the boss really wasn't joking around.

Wei Ying looked out of the window. It was still bright, so he supposed that he could let Lan Zhan sleep off the alcohol. Again, he carried the man to the bed and arranged his arms, taking out his hair ornaments. His hands hovered over the forehead ribbon before he pulled away.

This was happening a little too much for his liking. He'd get Lan Zhan drunk, and then carry him to bed.

With a sigh, he flopped down beside Lan Zhan and pressed closer to the warmth.

"Sweet dreams, Lan *er-gege*," Wei Ying whispered, shutting off his control over the doll.

He was out like a light.

Chapter End Notes

MO XUANYU I SWEAR YOU WILL GET A LOVING RELATIONSHIP IF IT'S THE
LAST THING I WRITE-

Chapter 34

Chapter Summary

Folks... I have nothing to say for myself. My strength lies in worldbuilding and complex but utterly inane bits of lore, not steamy makeout scenes. I sat through roughly 30 repetitions of the audio drama, then consulted the book. The things I do for a fic... God, I think I might die if I had to write a sex scene in.

Warnings: suggestiveness, they both get naked at some point but don't actually DO anything... that's about it, I suppose.

Be prepared for wangxian miscommunicating their way through literally the last part of the arc, because I damn near tore my own hair out when I read mdzs for the first time.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

A surge of spiritual energy jolted Wei Ying, and he gasped, his body jerking back instinctively. The mannequin could technically be activated by outside force, but this was a little too much—!

“Lan Zhan, stop.” Wei Ying gasped. “You have to stop, you’ll override the resentful energy-”

“Wei Ying.”

Finally, the pressure released, and his chest heaved, forcing resentful energy to circulate and purge the doll of spiritual energy.

“Lan Zhan, what the hell?”

“You were not moving. There was no spiritual or resentful energy, so I thought...” Lan Zhan lowered his eyes. “I thought you’d left me again.”

“Aiya...” Wei Ying grimaced. “I won’t leave you again. Er... I know! What can I do to make it up to you? I’ll do anything.”

Lan Zhan peered at Wei Ying. “Anything?”

“Anything.” Wei Ying vowed.

Lan Zhan nodded and stood up, grabbing Wei Ying’s wrist and tearing out of their room, down the stairs and out of the inn. Wei Ying barely had time to wave to the flabbergasted innkeeper before he was being tugged along the dark streets.

“Ow, ow, Lan Zhan! Where are we going?”

“Somewhere.”

Wei Ying yelped indignantly. “Oh, really! I couldn’t tell, really, Lan ZhAAH—”

Lan Zhan hauled them both over a fence, and Wei Ying suddenly realised two things.

One, Lan Zhan was drunk. Like, piss drunk.

Two, Lan Zhan had just given up the position of being responsible to Wei Ying.

“Lan Zhan!” Wei Ying hissed, watching Lan Zhan prowl around the yard. “There are people sleeping here! What do you want?”

Clucking answered his question, and Wei Ying felt his knees go weak. *The venerable Hanguang-jun, stealing?* If Lan Qiren caught wind of this, he’d skin Wei Ying and then have a qi deviation.

“Lan Zhan,” Wei Ying moaned helplessly when he saw Lan Zhan cross the yard, looking up at the tree. “We have to go, you can’t—”

“Here.” Lan Zhan shoved two fat chickens into Wei Ying’s arms, and followed it u a handful of jujubes. “For Wei Ying.”

“For me?” Wei Ying said faintly. Lan Zhan nodded solemnly and drew his sword, turning to a relatively clear expanse of rock. With a few clean strikes, he had written: ‘Lan Wangji of Gusu Lan—’

With an expectant look, Lan Zhan turned to Wei Ying and held Bichen out, hilt first.

“What?”

Lan Zhan didn’t say anything, merely continued to stare evenly at Wei Ying. He even shook the hilt a little, and when Wei Ying took the blade, Lan Zhan stepped back.

A hysterical laugh threatened to bubble up. With a few strokes, he carved his own name into the wall: ‘Wei Wuxian of Yunmeng Jiang—’

Lan Zhan took the sword and finished off the carvings with a flourish, then added some bunnies at the bottom of the text.

“Lan Wangji of Gusu Lan and Wei Wuxian of Yunmeng Jiang were here.” Wei Ying read out loud, feeling more and more ridiculous with every word. A thought occurred to him: when they were just children, he had confided in Lan Zhan about what he wanted to do when—if—Lan Zhan came to Yunmeng with him.

Was this because he had brought up all of the things that he wanted to do with Lan Zhan? They were just silly ramblings of a teenage him, but the fact that Lan Zhan remembered, and when he was drunk, had brought him out to do these things...

"Aiya, Lan Zhan." Wei Ying shook his head, smiling ruefully. "You can't do such things, my fragile heart can't take it."

Lan Zhan frowned and pressed his hand to Wei Ying's chest, right over where his heart was. Of course, there was no heartbeat, but it was a simple matter to change some of the spells so that his heart would beat for Lan Zhan.

"Wei Ying." Lan Zhan's gaze seemed to be simultaneously sharp and soft. "You need not pretend around me."

"Ah?" Wei Ying murmured.

"Do not pretend. Wei Ying is Wei Ying; I will care for him regardless."

Wei Ying laughed shakily. "Lan Zhan. Lan Zhan, you really..."

Lan Zhan stared at him, waiting for him to finish the thought.

Wei Ying refused to. It would be dangerous. "Let's go back, okay?"

Somehow, he managed to bring the both of them back into the inn and call for hot water to be brought up, depositing the chickens and jujubes on the counter. He stifled a laugh at the innkeeper's expression at seeing two men, one very obviously inebriated, stumble in, deposit chickens and jujubes, then call for a bath.

When they reached their room, Wei Ying dropped Lan Zhan unceremoniously on the bed, groaning as he stretched out the kinks in his back. Lan Zhan seemed to have other plans. He got up and looked out at the window, and Wei Ying sighed gustily.

"Lan Zhan, you have to take a bath." Wei Ying pleaded, looking at the leaves and feathers caught in his hair. "Come on, please? They already sent hot water up and everything. Do it for me, *Er gege*?"

Lan Zhan nodded sharply, and Wei Ying grinned and turned, sticking his hand into the water—luckily for him, he had inscribed a strengthening talisman and a dispelling talisman to his skin, feeling the muted itch of the spells crawling up his skin that was also not him at the same time.

"I think the bath is ready. Why don't you take off your clothes and get in?" Wei Ying turned around—

"—I've done it."

—and promptly turned away from Lan Zhan's naked body. Oh gods. Oh heavens give him strength. If Xie Lian was listening, please, let him get through this alive. Hua Cheng too, anyone who could protect him from this... this... whatever this was!

"You—"

Mentally, Wei Ying slapped himself a couple of times. Get a hold of yourself, Wei Ying! This isn't the first time you've seen Lan Zhan naked!

But this is the first time with less than pure intentions, a quiet voice whispered. He ruthlessly stomped out that train of thought and tried to compose himself again.

"The water's ready, so you can get in now." Wei Ying said, focusing on the area directly to the left of Lan Zhan's ear. Nothing wrong with staring at an ear, right? Except that they were pinked from the alcohol, and Wei Ying wondered what it would feel like to nibble on the shell of his ear, and the sounds Lan Zhan might make— no, nope. Goodness, he really had to stop.

He chose to stare at the steaming surface of the bath instead, until a warm hand slid into his robes and tried to undress him by tugging on his sash.

"Ah, wait, wait! You don't have to help me undress, I'm not bathing now!" Besides, it's not like I can, anyway, Wei Ying added in his head. Cloth was still cloth, no matter what he did to spell it. It wouldn't do much to clean a doll, anyway.

Lan Zhan looked at him and exhaled softly. Disappointment glimmered behind those amber eyes, and Wei Ying found himself scrambling for an explanation.

"Uh—it's, it's nothing against you! I just prefer a bigger tub, that's all. And it's not like the two of us can fit, right?" Wei Ying laughed nervously. However, Lan Zhan seemed to accept this response and let go of Wei Ying's robes with a huff.

He walked past Wei Ying—who pointedly averted his eyes—and stepped into the bath.

"Alright, just...take your time bathing, I'll be outside." Wei Ying breathed a sigh of relief and turned to go, but he had to hurry back when he heard Lan Zhan getting out of the tub.

"Huh? Ah—wait, what are you doing? Why are you getting out—aiyo, you haven't bathed properly yet."

"Not bathing anymore."

"Why not? You'll be dirty if you don't bathe."

By way of reply, Lan Zhan just got out of the bath and walked past Wei Ying serenely.

"Wait, don't walk around like that! You'll make the floor wet." Wei Ying chased after Lan Zhan, grabbing his wrist and turning him to look at Wei Ying. A thought occurred to him, and he almost didn't want to pose the question.

"You... Do you want me to... bathe you?"

Lan Zhan just huffed again, the tips of his ears pinking. Wei Ying had to suppress a sigh. Aiyo, Lan Zhan. Not just anyone can decipher your quiet huffs and minute expression changes. He should learn to speak his mind.

Wei Ying sighed. "Alright, alright, I'll help you bathe. Get back in the tub, Lan Zhan."

"Mn."

Wei Ying wet a cloth with the bath water, watching Lan Zhan settle back into the bathtub, looking decidedly softer than usual. How could he refuse Lan Zhan like this? Whatever, he was just going to rub the cloth a few times and call it quits.

He ran the cloth over Lan Zhan's shoulders, pointedly trying to ignore the other man's heated gaze.

"Hm? Why are you staring at me?" Wei Ying held Lan Zhan's gaze, but when the latter didn't look away, Wei Ying sighed in fond exasperation. "Aiya, you have to close your eyes. What if the water gets into your eyes? You'll be the one who feels uncomfortable, not me."

Lan Zhan just lowered himself into the water, submerging the lower half of his face into the water and blowing bubbles moodily.

"*Er gege*, how old are you?" Wei Ying chuckled, watching Lan Zhan blow bubbles. "Come on, get up so I can wash you."

"Mn." Lan Zhan gets up, and Wei Ying busies himself with the smooth expanse of skin. His touch lingered slightly over the brand on his chest. This brand... if memory served him well, this was in the exact location where he got branded, too.

"Lan Zhan. Can you...turn around? I'll wash your back too."

"Mn." Lan Zhan swept his hair from his back, and Wei Ying dipped his cloth into water again, tenderly brushing over the raised scar tissue on Lan Zhan's back.

These scars... The only people who could do this to him were his brother and Lan Qiren. So what exactly did he do to get these...?

"Lan Zhan."

"Hm?"

"Who..." Who am I, in your eyes? Wei Ying couldn't bear to ask that question. Not now. There were better times to ask this question.

A hiss interrupted him from his thoughts, and Wei Ying immediately splayed his fingers over the part where he had rubbed a little too hard, resisting the urge to press kisses to those scars.

"Ah! Sorry, sorry. Did I rub too hard? Does it hurt?" Wei Ying whispered, and he felt the shiver that rippled through Lan Zhan. The air was thick with steam, and Wei Ying felt his skin dampen with sweat.

"Don't touch me."

“Why? You’ve let me touch you for so long now...” Wei Ying traced the scars, but when he felt Lan Zhan stiffen, he let go of that endeavour. “Okay. I won’t touch you. I’ll leave you to clean yourself.”

Lan Zhan whirled around, his hand finding Wei Ying’s wrist and gripping it tightly.

“Don’t go.”

Wei Ying struggled for a few moments before conceding defeat. Lan Zhan’s arm strength really was something else... A small, traitorous part of his mind gleefully supplied the idea of Lan Zhan holding him down for... other purposes.

“Hanguang-jun. You’re the one at fault here now. You ordered me to bathe you, then you forbade me from touching you, and now you won’t let me go? Just what do you want me to do?”

“...Regardless, you mustn't go.” There was a kind of quiet desperation in Lan Zhan’s voice, like he was talking to a different version of Wei Ying.

“Hmph. You’re so unreasonable when you’re drunk.” Wei Ying hummed, bringing his other hand to lift Lan Zhan’s chin, watching as those plush lips parted and his eyes widened in surprise. Oh, surprise was a good look on Lan Zhan.

He trailed his fingers down to his collarbone, keeping his touches feather light and shy. Lan Zhan grabbed both his hands, but he did loosen his grip on Wei Ying’s wrists.

“Do not touch.”

“But I want to touch you. What are you going to do? Make me copy the rules? Lock me up somewhere? Or...will you tie me up with your forehead ribbon? Hm?” Wei Ying felt a slow smile spread across his face, and he saw Lan Zhan’s eyes darken. It sent the thrill of danger down his spine, and he chuckled quietly.

Lan Zhan closed his eyes, and his next breaths were shaky and uneven. Oh, the great Hanguang-jun was losing his composure. Wei Ying could get drunk on that idea alone, and he certainly felt like he was intoxicated.

“Hanguang-jun, are you telling me—” Wei Ying trailed his hand downwards, and Lan Zhan let him. Over his chest, pressing against the soft jut of his hip bone. “—that you don’t like being touched like this?”

His hand sank into the water, and he heard a hitch in Lan Zhan’s breath. The grip on his wrist tightened almost painfully, and his world flipped.

“Ah-” Wei Ying was pulled into steaming water, and he barely had time to breathe before Lan Zhan’s lips found his—or the illusion of his lips anyway.

Oh , he thought dizzily, his eyes fluttering at the force of the kiss. The two of us can fit in the bath after all.

“Lan Zhan-” he gasps, before Lan Zhan captures his lips again, taking advantage of his open mouth to slip his tongue in. Wei Ying made an embarrassing noise and sank deeper into his touch, groaning at the warmth that sank into his very bones.

It felt strange. Lan Zhan was kissing him, but the feeling was muted, almost like he was feeling it through a thin layer of silk. Wei Ying wondered if Lan Zhan would want to know that he was kissing a doll before Lan Zhan licked along the roof of his mouth and all higher thought came screeching to a halt.

Lan Zhan devoured him, running his tongue along Wei Ying’s teeth and the roof of his mouth. Wei Ying could taste the sweetness of the wine on Lan Zhan’s tongue, and he chased that lingering taste, wondering if this would spoil even Emperor’s Smile for him.

When they broke apart, there was a thin string of saliva connecting them, though Wei Ying broke it by pressing his thumb against Lan Zhan’s lower lip. Then, he leaned in and pressed a chaste kiss onto Lan Zhan’s upper lip, giggling at the surprised huff.

“How’s that? Are you angry yet?” Wei Ying asked breathlessly. Lan Zhan looked divine like this, his lips parted and shiny with saliva, his eyes darkened and his cheeks dusted pink.

Wei Ying pressed his palm against Lan Zhan’s heated skin, curling his hand around the nape of Lan Zhan’s neck.

“Lan Zhan, did you know? I love it when you get angry.” He whispered, pulling down Lan Zhan’s bottom lip with his thumb. Before he could say anything more, Lan Zhan surged forward, pressing Wei Ying into another kiss and tugging at his robes, pulling them off his shoulders.

Wei Ying groaned when he felt Lan Zhan’s hands wrap around his waist and stay there, holding him close. He reached around, tangling his hands into Lan Zhan’s hair and entangling them ever closer.

He wanted to be intertwined with Lan Zhan forever, until they could not tell where each other began and ended, and when he whispered this to Lan Zhan in between kisses, Lan Zhan’s grip on his waist tightened. Wei Ying was sure that they would have left bruises if he kept going. The thought excited him. Lan Zhan nipped at his lip, and Wei Ying whined into the kisses.

The kisses slowed to something more languid and fluid. The water was cooling, and when Wei Ying breathlessly asked if they were going to do it right now—

“Lan Zhan! You- don’t do that!”

—Lan Zhan simply struck the bathtub, shattering it and sending water all over the floor. He lifted Wei Ying easily, dropping him onto the bed and lowering his head, but Wei Ying flips them over, so that he was on top instead.

“My, my, Hanguang-jun. I didn’t know you’d be this improper in bed.” Wei Ying whispered, leaning down to suck on Lan Zhan’s earlobe. He gently bit onto the soft cartilage, giggling at

the sharp inhale that came from Lan Zhan.

Lan Zhan's hands found their way to Wei Ying's shoulders and squeezed, so hard that Wei Ying gasped and patted his hands. Lan Zhan released his grip immediately, but his hands were already wandering towards Wei Ying's sash, the only thing holding his propriety together—though he was sure that he didn't look decent at all, with his robes soaked through and clinging to his skin, and his breaths coming out in heavy pants.

“So impatient, Hanguang-jun!” Wei Ying playfully batted Lan Zhan's hands away, and he swore he saw Lan Zhan's eyes narrow slightly. “Alright, alright. I'll undress myself, okay?”

Lan Zhan's gaze was hungry, and Wei Ying shivered as his hand trailed to his sash—

Wait. What in the Three Realms was he doing? Lan Zhan was drunk!

He pulled himself off the bed, refusing to even acknowledge the heady mix of desire and lust that swirled through him. He couldn't take advantage of Lan Zhan like that, and this body wasn't even real.

Call Wei Ying a hopeless romantic, but he didn't want their first time—if there was ever one, not like Wei Ying was considering it or anything—to be so... artificial.

A warm hand pulled him down to the bed, and all of his thoughts immediately stopped when Lan Zhan mouthed at his neck, his breath hot against his throat.

“Ah, Lan Zhan, Lan Zhan, we can't—I don't think—”

“Then do not.”

“What?”

“Do not think.” Lan Zhan met Wei Ying's gaze, and his eyes were like liquid gold, smouldering with heat. This close, Wei Ying could practically see the light brown flecks in his eyes.

“Oh.” Wei Ying whispered. “Oh, I... Okay.”

He leaned back, and Lan Zhan took his time, trailing kisses along Wei Ying's throat and chest, lingering over his chest where the brand mark used to be, pressing kisses over his knuckles. Every time Wei Ying tried to speak, Lan Zhan would shush him.

He was settled on the bed, and even though he couldn't technically take it any further, it felt nice to have Lan Zhan's lips on him, making him feel seen and loved.

Suddenly, Lan Zhan tore away, and Wei Ying whined at the loss of warmth. He climbed up to the sight of Lan Zhan putting on his robes, and his heart squeezed painfully.

“Lan Zhan?” He asked hoarsely. “Are you awake?”

A long silence. Then, “Mn.”

Wei Ying felt his world come crashing down. He felt his lips move, mumbling some excuse about getting the boss to give him a new room and to clean the mess up, and he scooped his robes up and slipped them on, barely feeling the dampness.

Minutes later, he was seated in his new room, staring vacantly out of the window. It was high enough to deal damage to the doll. He couldn't feel pain in this body—not really—so he could do all sorts of things to himself.

Like... throwing himself out of the window. He felt himself wondering how it would feel if his mechanical joints shattered into pieces. Would he die? Would his soul be ejected and torn apart?

Anything would be better than this. He was seized with a sudden restlessness and grabbed his flute, jumping out of the window and onto the roofs. He'd investigate Guanyin Temple by himself. If he hurried, he wouldn't need to meet Lan Zhan or Jiang Cheng or anyone, and he could disappear again.

But first, he'd have to clean up the evidence of their nightly jaunt.

Chapter End Notes

The entire Guanyin Temple arc is just:

LWJ: kisses him, gets him whatever he wants, indulges him, basically treats him so incredibly nicely-

WWX: I don't think he loves me, I'll just disappear after this lol

Chapter 35

Chapter Summary

So the Guanyin Temple arc will be... different, from the canon. It came to me in a fever dream, I have to write it.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

When Wei Ying reached the stone wall that Lan Zhan had basically graffitied, he found Wen Ning already there, filing away the words with a single-minded dedication.

“Young master Wei?” Wen Ning turned around, file in hand. His face covered in pale stone dust, his dark eyes peering out through a white mask.

“You... what are you doing?” Wei Ying didn’t know what to say.

Wen Ning looked down at the file, then back at the half erased words. “I thought it would be a nuisance if Second Master Lan and young master Wei had their names carved onto a wall, so I decided to...”

“What?”

“Young master Wei, are you...” Wen Ning looked as though he was about to die of embarrassment.

Wei Ying looked down, and he realised how he must look; his hair messy and his robes rumpled. Well, nothing a simple spell wouldn’t fix, since all of this was merely an illusion.

Wei Ying flopped onto the floor, crossing his arms.

“Wen Ning, I’ve decided I don’t drink alcohol anymore. It’s far too much trouble.”

Wen Ning had a look of endless patience on his face as he turned back to the wall. “Young master Wei, forgive me for saying this, but I do not think you will be able to wean yourself off alcohol.”

Wei Ying grumbled a little, but they both knew that Wen Ning was right. Back in the Burial Mounds, Wen Qing had tried every way she could think of to get him to stop drinking.

It had just made him more adept at hiding his alcohol and pretending to be more sober than he really felt. That was why he could still walk in a straight line despite drinking enough to see double sometimes.

“Wen Ning. Have you ever thought of what you want to do? After all...” Wei Ying waved his hand vaguely around, gesturing to their situation right now. Wen Ning looked thoughtful, but before he could respond, Wei Ying shook his head and got to his feet.

“I want alcohol,” Wei Ying complained. “But If I can’t have that, then I’ll get something else instead. Wen Ning, let’s go!”

“Where are we going, young master Wei?” Wen Ning had put up a token struggle when Wei Ying grabbed his hand, but ultimately had relaxed.

Wei Ying grinned. “To find trouble.”

The temple was quiet, in the night. No prayers, no voices, just the lingering smell of incense. His heart wrenched when he thought of Lan Zhan back in the room. What was he doing now? Sleeping? Cleaning himself again?

It would do him no good to think about it anyway, so he walked around the entire temple’s outer walls. It was quiet—too quiet. Even at this time, there should have been shuffling footsteps of the patrols, or the light of lanterns.

Wei Ying snuck Wen Ning around, the fierce corpse surprisingly agile on his feet.

They hopped up onto the roof, but before they could get up there, Wen Ning shuddered.

“Barrier,” he whispered.

Wei Ying nodded and climbed up onto the roof. He stilled in shock when he looked into the courtyard. The courtyard was bustling, all the lanterns lit and a mixture of Lanling Jin sect members and monks.

But that wasn’t what he was looking at.

Lan Xichen was standing there serenely. Nothing was amiss; he still had his sword, and the people there treated him with respect, answering anything that he asked. Still, he saw the bows and arrows strapped onto the cultivators’ backs, and their hands were resting on their swords.

Wei Ying turned to Wen Ning. “Go and get Hanguang-jun now!” He hissed, turning back to the scene when he heard Wen Ning disappear. He glanced around, but Jin Guangyao was nowhere to be found. Perhaps in the temple? It would make sense.

Then he heard a bark, and he had to remind himself that no, fear could not forcibly eject his soul from the doll, but good gods, if his soul didn’t try—

“Fairy! Disobedient dog... shut up before you wake the entire street!” Jin Ling’s voice floated to him, and he groaned quietly. Kid, please, not now—

Lan Xichen’s expression changed. He must have recognised Jin Ling’s voice. The cultivators did too, since Jin Ling was technically the young master of Lanling Jin, but their hands were tightening on their swords. Some of the monks were nocking arrows into their bows.

Jin Ling's voice came again, closer to the doors. "Fairy! Shut up, or I'll have to cook you!" There was scratching, like Fairy was scratching at the door, and Wei Ying barely held back a whimper. His hands were sweaty, and he wiped them off on his clothes.

Jin Ling knocked. "Is anyone here? Hello?"

"Do not hurt him." Lan Xichen whispered, but the group didn't seem to hear him. The barrier prevented sound from leaking out, but it must have been highly suspicious to Jin Ling who had been hammering on the door, loud enough to wake the dead.

"Whatever. Fairy, come on!" A joyful bark answered him, and Wei Ying breathed a sigh of relief. Yes, good dog, lead your master away. If Wei Ying was a braver man, he'd go and feed Fairy a few treats.

But then he heard a sound that he was very familiar with. Wei Ying's heart leapt into his mouth, and he groaned quietly. Jin Ling really couldn't take a hint. He was climbing the godforsaken walls!

When his head peeked up over the roof and he caught a glimpse of the courtyard, his eyes widened. One of the monks who probably had never seen Jin Ling before, loosed an arrow.

Even from a distance, Wei Ying could tell that the man was a good archer; if that shot hit, it would kill. Jin Ling's eyes widened, and Wei Ying plucked his bamboo flute from his belt and hurled it.

It intercepted the arrow midair, the bamboo splintering with the force of it and snapping cleanly in half.

"Run, Jin Ling!" Wei Ying shouted. His position was already compromised, and he could not—would not—have his shijie and that peacock's son die on his watch. He ducked behind a statue to avoid the arrows, cursing himself for not bringing any talismans. Just as he was about to whistle peel off a layer of resentful energy from his disguise, a warm voice came from behind him.

"It's alright if your flute is broken, young master Wei, but it would be a shame if your hands or tongue were to go missing, wouldn't it?"

Wei Ying nodded. Well, he might as well play along with him. "Fair enough."

"May I request you get into the courtyard? We wouldn't want to disturb the street now, would we?"

"So polite, Sect Leader Jin." Wei Ying hopped down into the courtyard, uncaring of how the swords and arrows were pointed at him.

Jin Guangyao smiled as he followed. "It's my pleasure."

Wei Ying sighed in relief when he saw Jin Ling surrounded by monks, held at swordpoint. At least he was alive.

Jin Ling bowed to Jin Guangyao, politely but despite that, his eyes were filled with confusion and fear.

“Shushu.”

“A-Ling.” That ever present smile barely slipped off Jin Guangyao’s face as he turned to survey the place. “Where is Fairy?”

One of the monks stepped forward. “The dog was vicious and fought. It got away.”

Wei Ying felt satisfaction flare through him when he saw the monk cradling a bloodied arm, where bite marks were visible. His own skin crawled with fear, but he silently hoped that Fairy was well. Jin Ling cared for the dog, after all.

Jin Guangyao nodded. “Catch that dog and kill it. It’s too smart for its own good.”

“Of course.” A group of monks left the temple, and Jin Ling turned wide eyes to Jin Guangyao.

“*Shushu*, you... Fairy was given to me by you! Are you going to kill her?” Jin Ling blurted out, his eyes wide with fear and astonishment.

Jin Guangyao chose not to answer that question. “A-Ling, what are you doing here?”

Jin Ling’s eyes flicked to Wei Ying guiltily, and Wei Ying blinked back innocently. For once, he really wasn’t involved in this.

“A—Sect Leader Jin, Jin Ling is still a child.” Lan Xichen murmured.

“So I can tell.”

“He is your nephew too.”

“I remember.” Jin Guangyao laughed quietly. “*Er-ge*, do you think me so brutal as to execute a child simply because he was here?”

Lan Xichen remained silent, and Jin Guangyao smiled at Jin Ling, all teeth and dimples. “A-Ling, you heard what *Er-ge* said. If you do not do as I say, I might have to do something violent to you.”

Jin Ling looked confused, and Wei Ying understood him completely. Such terrifying words delivered in a sweet tone... it would confuse anyone. Nevertheless, Jin Ling moved towards Lan Xichen and Wei Ying quietly, and the latter tugged Jin Ling behind his back.

Jin Guangyao turned to the temple, and Wei Ying took this moment to trace characters onto Jin Ling’s hand.

Does your uncle know?

Jin Ling’s fingers twitched.

No.

Wei Ying exhaled. This was bad. Hopefully, Wen Ning could convince Lan Zhan to get over here; the last time they had met while Lan Zhan was drunk was... not pretty.

“I’ll protect you.” He whispered to Jin Ling.

“Protect him, Yiling Patriarch? Perhaps you should unhand my nephew first.” Jin Guangyao had returned, and Wei Ying cursed himself for tuning out the conversation.

Jin Ling’s hand jerked out of Wei Ying’s hand at that, and he stepped closer to Lan Xichen instead. So he hasn’t forgiven Wei Ying yet. That... that was alright.

“What are you doing inside, Sect Leader Jin?”

Jin Guangyao’s eyes curved into thin crescents. “Well, answer me this first, Yiling Patriarch: how did you know we would be here?”

“There was a deed for a location in Yunping City in your secret vault, Sect Leader Jin.”

“My apologies, that was careless of me. I should have put it in a more secure place.” Jin Guangyao gestured to the door. “Please, after you.”

Wei Ying walked in beside Lan Xichen, and it took him a while, but he realised that his sword was not glowing.

“Zewu-jun, what happened?”

Lan Xichen smiled haplessly. “I was tricked by Lianfang-jun and got my spiritual powers sealed. Even though I have my spiritual weapons with me, they will not be of any use.”

Wei Ying sighed. Another good man, fallen to Jin Guangyao’s lies.

“It’s okay, he can be very convincing sometimes.”

“Lay out an array for Hanguang-jun, when he comes.”

“When? Sect Leader Jin, you seem to have an awful lot of confidence that he’ll come.” Wei Ying frowned, his mind racing with the possibilities. What if? What if Lan Zhan didn’t come? He couldn’t undo the spells on his body unless he went back to Ghost City, and he didn’t have *Chenqing* with him.

“Of course Hanguang-jun would come. If you noticed the anomalies in Guanyin Temple, surely he’d have done so too, no? And if you tell me that he isn’t coming... please, don’t try to lie to me.”

Lan Xichen frowned. “Young master Wei, if Wangji is here, why is he not with you?”

“We’re acting separately.”

Lan Xichen blinked, as though surprised by this information. “Separately? But when you came back from the Burial Mounds, you were injured.”

Honestly, ‘injured’ was putting it mildly, if you counted getting ejected from your rotting body and having to create a puppet for your soul as ‘mild’.

“I couldn’t sleep tonight, so I came out.” That was the truth. “Hanguang-jun doesn’t know I left, since we got two rooms.” Technically, also true.

At this, Jin Guangyao and Lan Xichen exchanged looks.

“Excuse me, but... two rooms, young master Wei?” Jin Guangyao said delicately, looking like he was about to broach a difficult subject at a conference.

“Yes, two rooms. Is there a problem?” Wei Ying snapped, but he felt cold inside. Did they know?

“So you really don’t know...” Lan Xichen wasn’t smiling at all, and the resemblance was so striking to Wei Ying that he had to fight back a wave of guilt.

“Yes, I don’t, so please enlighten this lowly one.”

Jin Guangyao laughed gently and shook his head. “Thirteen years of pining by Hanguang-jun, and he can’t even get a happy ending.”

Wei Ying felt like a bucket of cold water had just been thrown over his head.

“What?”

Jin Guangyao looked at him with something akin to pity. “You—”

“Young master Wei, could it be that even after you spent such a long time together with Wangji, you still do not know of his feelings?” Lan Xichen looked... almost furious, somehow.

Of course he knew about Lan Zhan’s feelings, Wei Ying wanted to scream. Lan Zhan was his *zhiji*, his lifelong confidante. But he didn’t want to burden Lan Zhan with that. All of those times that they had gotten intimate, it was just under the influence of alcohol. Because it was like that, he couldn’t very well confess to Lan Zhan when he was like that, could he?

So he just kept putting it off, and the longer he did that, the more times he found chances to get Lan Zhan drunk again, just to pretend.

Oh, he was such a fool.

“I... I don’t, I don’t understand. We’re just friends.” Wei Ying finished lamely, wincing at the way Lan Xichen’s brows steadily rose with each word of his.

“Friends.” Lan Xichen repeated in an incredulous tone. “You think of yourself merely as a friend to my brother, Wangji.”

“Well, yeah.” Wei Ying shrugged, the action conveying a peace that he did not feel. “There hasn’t been any other pieces of evidence to suggest otherwise.”

“Young master Wei, you really...” Lan Xichen raised his head to look at him. “You want evidence? Fine. I’ll tell you what my brother sacrificed for you.”

Chapter End Notes

I hate it here my newest fic idea has turned into a modern wangxian au where yllz wxl meets lwj through jail cell bars for the first time and it's so complicated and intrinsic I hate planning it but I can tell I'm going to love writing it

Chapter 36

Chapter Summary

right, fellas! Some warnings for this one, let's see...

Warnings: decapitation (not graphically described), blood, major character death, angst.

I know what you're thinking, and I know how this looks. Trust me, it's actually not that bad

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“My brother,” Lan Xichen began. “Is a good man. But he loved you—oh yes, he did—too much. Did you ever wonder why he wore only white? Did you ever wonder how you managed to get out of Nightless City?”

“I thought I walked.” Wei Ying mumbled.

“Wangji carried you. He hid you away, and healed your wounds. He tried to take you back to Gusu so he could care for you, and you told him two words. Do you remember?”

“I...I don’t remember much from that time.” His memory had always been bad, but those few days had been shrouded in fog, perhaps from trauma, perhaps from resentful energy.

Wei Ying dared to meet Lan Xichen’s gaze, and oh, he was angry now. “Get lost.”

“Wei Ying... Please.”

“Get lost.”

“Wei Ying, please. Come back to Gusu with me.” Lan Zhan was desperate, his pale robes stained with blood and dirt and marring his pristine image. Wei Ying hated it.

He shoved Lan Zhan away with all the strength he could muster and snarled, “Get lost already!”

“When the elders from Gusu Lan came, he stood against us, for you. He grievously injured thirty-three elders. He took thirty three lashes with the discipline whip, for you. Everything he has done, he has done it for you.” Lan Xichen took a deep breath. “Even when he was healing, he snuck out to the Burial Mounds,”

“No... no, I... I didn’t know, I—he never told me...” Wei Ying mumbled, reaching up to grab at his hair and tug at it, harder and harder until pinpricks of pain bloomed; a bad habit from his time in the Burial Mounds.

“Wangji wouldn’t tell you all of this. He doesn’t want to make you feel like you owe him anything. He loves you; even a deaf and blind person would be able to see that. And you played with my brother’s heart like this.” Lan Xichen shook his head. “You truly are the only mistake that my brother made.”

Wei Ying couldn’t breathe. All this time, Lan Zhan had... The puzzle pieces clicked. Everything fell into shining, shimmering order, and—oh, Wei Ying really was a fool, wasn’t he?—Wei Ying didn’t know if he wanted to laugh or cry.

He had to—he had to clear this up somehow. He stood, striding towards the door, but cultivators moved towards him, blocking his way. Behind him, he heard Jin Guanyao chuckle.

“Young master Wei, as eager as you are to run back to Hanguang-jun and clear this misunderstanding up, I’m afraid I cannot let you go. I understand—”

“Understand me my ass!” Wei Ying snapped, sweeping two monks away. He was still capable of great damage in this form—perhaps even more so, since he could feel no pain to stop him—and he would get to Lan Zhan, and heaven help the cultivators blocking his way if he didn’t.

“I just wanted to say that—”

A silvery blue sword shot forward, knocking back all of the cultivators. Wei Ying followed the path of the blade, watching as it flew back into his hand.

“—Hanguang-jun is here.”

And indeed, he was. Dressed as impeccably as ever, his face serene and calm. Suddenly, all the words that Wei Ying wanted to say shrivelled up, and he swallowed roughly.

“Lan Zhan,” he whispered.

“You see? If young master Wei is here, then Hanguang-jun will always be nearby.” Jin Guanyao sighed.

Lan Zhan looked like he was about to send Bichen forward again, but Jin Guanyao was faster. There was a slight pressure at his throat, and Lan Xichen inhaled sharply.

“Be careful,” Lan Xichen hissed.

“Hanguang-jun, I suggest you do not move and take a few steps back now, lest my hand slips.”

Lan Zhan’s eyes landed on his throat, where Wei Ying was sure that a thin wire was wrapped around his throat.

Wei Ying tried to laugh. "Lan Zhan, don't listen to him. This isn't—it won't be permanent."

The string tightened around Wei Ying's neck, and a mad, stupid idea sprung into being.

It was idiotic. Stupid. One might even call it downright outrageous.

But it was brilliant in its simplicity. It would both allow him to escape this situation and remove himself as some kind of chess piece for Jin Guangyao's use. He just had to make sure that it would go through without a hitch first, which sounded harder than it actually was. Wei Ying hoped Lan Zhan would understand if it all came down to that.

"Oh, but Hanguang-jun will do anything, even if I asked him to drop *Bichen* and seal his spiritual energy. After all, I hold his life in my hands, don't I?"

Wei Ying's eyes dilated when he saw Lan Zhan unsheathe his sword, and before he knew it, his mouth was moving.

"Kill me then!" Wei Ying laughed, pressing his neck closer to the wire. "Jin Guangyao, let me tell you, I know what your plan is, and it will never work."

"Do you not care for Hanguang-jun's heart?" Even now, Jin Guangyao had a way with words, and those oily, poisonous words wormed his way into his heart. But he knew that Jin Guangyao would never kill him—maim, injure, perhaps, but never death—for he was too valuable of a chess piece to be left alive.

And Wei Ying hated it. He didn't want to be a piece in some sick and twisted game.

"If I die, I'll come back as a ghost." Wei Ying managed a cocky grin as he stared right at Lan Zhan, praying that the man would understand. "I'll become a ghost and I'll kill you too, Jin Guangyao. It isn't the first time I crawled back from the dead."

"Wei Ying." Oh. Fear was written all over Lan Zhan's face, and when he made eye contact, he *knew*. He knew what Wei Ying was going to do.

"It's okay, Lan Zhan." Wei Ying grabbed the wire around his neck, pulling at it until it was sure to have cut into him if he were human. "This time, I'm not going to be happy dying. But it's for you. Trust me."

And with a quick snap, he pulled the wire taut, neatly severing his head.

"Wei Ying!" Lan Zhan screamed—the first time he had raised his voice in forever—and perhaps it was fitting, that he had lost his inhibitions the moment that Wei Ying's body was broken.

He knew, logically, that Wei Ying was still alive, that this was probably part of his plan. He knew, logically, that the body that slumped against Jin Guangyao was merely a doll, and not his Wei Ying.

He knew.

And yet he felt grief.

Logic did not spare the heart.

He dropped from the roof, rushing to the body and cradling it to his chest. Even in death, Wei Ying had a spell in place that would give the illusion of blood, and it was this fake blood that stained his snow white robes now, as he cried silently over his beloved.

The empty eyes of his love stared at him from the side, his face still twisted in the ghost of a smile, and Lan Zhan could only find comfort in the fact that Wei Ying was most likely still alive, and still listening in—

“Oh.” Jin Guangyao looked uncharacteristically shocked, staring down at his robes, then at the body. “Oh.”

Even Lan Xichen looked shocked, and Jin Ling... Oh, Lan Zhan couldn't bear to meet his eyes. He'd lost yet another family member, and despite whatever the young boy said, Lan Zhan knew he cared deeply for Wei Ying.

“Hanguang-jun! Hanguang-jun!” Jin Ling was out of breath, looking like he had just run a mile.

“Jin Ling.”

“Hanguang-jun, it's—it's bad, jiujiu has taken Mo Xuanyu into custody! He thinks he's Wei Wuxian, please! He's going to kill Mo Xuanyu; he hates demonic cultivation!”

At that time, he had thought little of that. But Jin Ling must have snuck out to do this, and despite knowing that Jiang Cheng would give Jin Ling an earful, he had still done it.

Outside, it began to rain, and when Lan Zhan raised his head to look at Jin Ling, the boy was shell shocked. He was seated there, his knuckles white from gripping his robes.

“I'm sorry,” Lan Zhan said hoarsely, but a peal of thunder muted his words, and illuminated the paleness of Jin Ling's face.

“ Shushu .” Jin Ling whispered in horror. “You... you killed Wei Wuxian.”

At this point, Jin Guangyao seemed to get the memo that he still had a part to play, so he put on a pleading expression and turned to Jin Ling.

“A-Ling, surely you didn't miss it? Wei Wuxian pulled the wire around himself. It wasn't a murder, it was suicide.”

Lan Zhan allowed himself to be led to a pillar, and he didn't resist even when his spiritual energy was sealed. He clutched onto the doll like it was his lifeline—because right now, it probably was—and hoped. He rhythmically ran his thumb over Wei Ying's own hand, feeling the coarse cloth underneath it and the absence of fingernails. Wei Ying was too good at making illusions; if Lan Zhan had been presented with this body and someone had claimed to be the one who had beheaded Wei Ying, well...

That person would have every reason to fear Hanguang-jun.

But as long as the hand under his touch felt like cloth, everything would be alright. He had to believe.

Then the door shattered, and Jiang Cheng walked in from the thunderstorm, Zidian coiled around him and the bodies of the cultivators lying outside unconsciously.

"Alright," Jiang Cheng growled. "Where the hell is Wei Wuxian?"

And Lan Zhan felt his heart plummet.

Chapter End Notes

so... how is it?

Chapter 37

Chapter Summary

graphic descriptions of burned and melted bodies. If you don't want to read it, it starts at "The scene that greeted him looked like it came straight from hell." and ends at "someone behind him"

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“Wei Wuxian!” Jiang Cheng roared, Zidian sparking behind him, brighter than any thunderstorm. “I told you not to get into stupid shit, and here you are!”

He stopped when he noticed that there was no greeting back, and his eyes fell on the body.

Lan Zhan could sense the very moment that Jiang Cheng pieced together what had happened. He caught sight of Jin Ling, and his shoulders relaxed. Then he saw the headless body in Lan Zhan’s arms, and he was lost.

“He’s going into qi deviation!” Lan Xichen shouted, and Jin Guangyao sprung forward, sealing his spiritual energy with just a few taps and leading him to sit down beside Jin Ling.

Lan Zhan noted that he was alone with Wei Ying’s body, and once again, his brother was against him.

He plastered on a sweet smile and stepped forward. “Sect Leader Jiang, I must insist—”

“Jin Guangyao.” Jiang Cheng hissed, and it was so full of poison that Jin Guangyao’s smile faltered for a moment.

“Sect Leader Jiang?”

“I’m going to fucking end you. I’ll tear you apart with my bare hands, and when that’s done, I’ll tear your fucking sect down, brick by brick.” Jiang Cheng grinned, and Lan Zhan realised why he had been so feared in the Sunshot Campaign.

When Jiang Cheng was driven mad with rage and grief, he looked almost demonic, with his teeth stained with blood and his eyes alight.

“And you.” Jiang Cheng turned to Lan Zhan. “Why didn’t you stop him? Why did you let the one you loved die?”

Lan Zhan blinked slowly. He had to tell Jiang Cheng that this wasn't a real body, that it was just an illusion. But he couldn't tip everyone else off. Right now, Jin Guangyao was relaxed, and if they waited, they could launch an attack.

"He had a plan." Lan Zhan said slowly, hoping that he could convey the idea without words. "He said he would come back as a ghost."

Between his reddened eyes and his murderous expression, Jiang Cheng looked like he was either about to cry or kill a man.

"That bastard, always making these stupid plans up. This is—" Jiang Cheng's voice cracked. "—this is the second time he's said this to me, you know?"

Lan Zhan didn't know what else to say, so he remained silent.

Jin Guangyao turned to the depths of the temple, a flash of irritation crossing his face.

"Are you done?"

"It's buried too deep; we need a little more time!"

"Hurry up!"

At that exact moment, the temperature of the place plummeted, turning their breaths to fog.

"Wei Ying?" Lan Zhan murmured, an ember of hope flickering back to life in his chest.

A soft laugh answered him, bouncing around eerily. He felt a hand flick at his forehead ribbon for a split second, and then he heard the shrieks from the back of the temple. Jin Guangyao rushed there, and a terrible smell of burning flesh wafted out.

Lan Zhan fought the urge to throw up. Perhaps vegetarian fare had made him sensitive to the smell of meat.

A few of the monks stumbled out, and Jiang Cheng bit out a few curses that Lan Zhan privately agreed with. Their skin was smoking and red, and in some parts, had completely melted.

Lan Zhan came to a decision. Wei Ying was clearly safe; his soul was in this temple right now. He trusted Wei Ying, and by extension, his plan. So he laid the body against the pillar gently and stood, moving around the Guanyin statue and looking behind it.

The scene that greeted him looked like it came straight from hell.

A coffin lay open, the stone lid shoved to the side. On its lid, the remains of a seal flickered, already broken. A cloud of fine red mist hung over the place, and it smelt distinctly like the kind of oil that Wei Ying loved to drown his food in, but with the sharp, metallic tang of blood mixed in.

There were bodies all over the place, and the faces were completely melted, and some of them had gaping holes in their chests that revealed bloodied lungs and corroded rib cages.

Someone behind him—brother, perhaps—gasped quietly, and Lan Zhan heard a gruff order not to look.

The main entrance to the temple was thrown open, and Su She walked in, carrying a bundle of cloth with him.

“What is it?” Jin Guangyao hissed, clutching his hand, which was reddened and bubbling.

“Sect Leader, you’re hurt!” Su She dropped the bundle and rushed over, pulling out a bottle of medicine. “I found him outside and brought him in, I thought he would be useful.”

The bundle of cloth unwrapped itself slowly, revealing a very bedraggled Nie Huaisang.

“Explain.”

Su She practically tripped over himself to explain, and Lan Zhan was suddenly reminded why he hated—hate was a strong word. Dislike, perhaps—the man. “Sect Leader, if we have two other sect leaders here, then the others will know that we are serious.”

Jin Guangyao waved him off. “Entertain our guests while I investigate who has tampered with the coffin.”

To no one’s surprise, Su She turned to Lan Zhan. His gaze grew calculating when he saw the blood on his robes, and he must have seen Wei Ying’s head outside.

“So, Hanguang-jun. How does it feel to have the tables turned on you? The Yiling Patriarch is dead again! Surely you must rejoice; after all, the two of you were bitter enemies, were you not?”

Lan Zhan remained silent, but that didn’t seem to deter the man. In fact, it seemed to embolden him to continue speaking.

“What, even upholding your silence in a time like this? Come on, Hanguang-jun. It hardly matters now. How long will you stay silent, I wonder? If you don’t say anything, I’ll assume that you are quietly celebrating the death of the Yiling Patriarch.”

A quiet gust of cold air brushed past his cheek, bringing with it the ghost of Wei Ying’s laugh.

Lan Xichen was the one who spoke up. “Su She, Wangji has never wronged you while you studied in Cloud Recesses. Why are you antagonising him?”

Su She scoffed, and Lan Zhan sighed internally. These were just like the novels that Wei Ying used to read—all martial art heroes and saving pretty young maidens from danger.

Aiya, Lan Zhan! I didn’t know you read those! What else are you hiding from me these few years, hm? He could almost hear Wei Ying’s delighted teasing, and it kept him going.

“How dare I attack Second Young Master Lan, who’s been so talented ever since he was young? I just can’t bear the sight of him, walking around like he’s the best thing ever.”

This Su She... spending so much energy trying to be a knock-off Hanguang-jun. Nothing will be as good as the real thing!

Lan Zhan decided to take a gamble. *Mn.*

The chill retreated from him for a while, and Lan Zhan barely had time to mourn the loss because it was back again, and he could very clearly feel a consciousness pressing against him.

Lan Zhan? Lan Wangji? Hanguang-jun, Lan er-gege? You can hear me? Did it work?

Did what work? Lan Zhan asked curiously; had Wei Ying been trying to figure out a way to communicate with him all this while?

A while ago, Hua qianbei taught me this spell for a communication array. To be fair, it looked really complicated, and it runs on energy of any kind. I found out I couldn’t use it since resentful energy is... well, corrupted I guess, but since I left the body, I’ve refined the energy to let me power the array! It’s not perfect, since I had to modify the array to fit you in—

—Wei Ying. You changed a heavenly array so that I could talk to you. By yourself.

Yes? Anyway, I was—

We have to talk.

“Hanguang-jun! Are you even listening?”

Lan Zhan looked up, a little annoyed at being interrupted, and he stared Su She down until he backed away.

Goodness! He was blabbering on about all sorts of stupid things like could not and would not. It’s lucky you didn’t hear all that, Lan er-gege. In case you didn’t know, I’m sitting in your lap now, though you can’t see me.

Wei Ying.

Relax! If Su She could see it, he’d probably die of a qi deviation on the spot. And then I’d be blamed for a death again. I can’t have another sloppy death on my name, Lan Zhan! I can’t be called incompetent, I swear!

Lan Zhan couldn’t help it—he laughed. Just the softest exhale of air, and his lips curved up slightly. The cold air around him stiffened in surprise before relaxing again, like a cat sprawling across his lap. Lan Zhan liked how easily he could read Wei Ying, his voice, his expressions and his smile.

“You—!”

“You are not worthy of speaking to me. Or Wei Ying.” Lan Zhan enunciated slowly, making sure each syllable was clipped and cold.

Right as he mentioned his name, there was another laugh. It was a quiet laugh, but he would recognise his *zhiji*’s voice anywhere.

Su She ah, Su She... Won’t you say hello to me?

Wei Ying’s voice was chilling, but it was not directed towards him. Su She stumbled, his eyes wide. His hand instinctively went to his robes and clutched them closed.

“Who’s there?” Su She shouted, unsheathing his sword.

Sweet, sugary giggles echoed through the place, accompanied by the sweet notes of a pipa and the high pitched voice of a woman’s singing that was definitely not Wei Ying.

Relax, Lan Zhan. There’s a lot of resentful energy here; I’m just borrowing the souls and helping them out.

Jin Guangyao bustled over, his eyes darting to the darkened corners of the temple.

“There’s nothing in the coffin.”

“Nothing?” Su She looked shocked as well.

“If there’s nothing in the coffin, it means someone beat us to it. We have to go, it’s not safe here anymore.”

Several things happened at once.

Nie Huaisang sat up, rubbing his eyes. Lan Zhan almost pitied him, waking up in such a situation.

Su She spun around, just in time for a ghost to lunge at him, her makeup smeared and melting down her face, and claw three long grooves down his chest, exposing a series of holes. The ghost dissolved into wisps of dark smoke, but the damage had been done.

Jin Guangyao hurried over, pressing a bottle of medicine into Su She’s hands; he had been mauled by Fairy too, and he was very likely unfit for any kind of battle.

Lan Zhan’s eyes widened.

Huh. So it was him.

“Thousand Holes curse.”

I hate it here I'm building up action but at the same time also trying to keep enough content so I don't vomit a 5k chapter and peace out again

Chapter 38

Chapter Summary

I feel like this is super disjointed ugh

Warnings! Let's see... two occasions of the word whore, but like, scolding someone else with it. To be honest, I tried to cut out most of the swearing, but some things can't be helped, you know?

If you're reading this when it's completed, here's a good place to stop, drink some water, take a walk, stretch your legs!

“It was you.” Lan Zhan’s eyes narrowed. “You were the one who cursed Jin Zixun. Why.”

“Do I need a reason? I hate the man!” Su She laughed, though he shivered when one of the ghost girls drifted through him.

“Wei Ying was blamed because of your actions.”

“Oh, Hanguang-jun, how noble. Even if he was somehow cleared, the events that led to his downfall would have happened eventually. His cultivation and his actions were simply too volatile to let live.” Jin Guangyao smiled sweetly.

“Watch your mouth.” Jiang Cheng gritted his teeth.

“Sect Leader Jiang, perhaps you are the one who needs to hear this the most. After the Sunshot Campaign, you had such a dangerous man backing Lotus Pier. A young sect leader, and martial brothers with the Yiling Patriarch... you must understand why we all coveted or hated your position.”

Wei Ying wanted to kill Jin Guangyao for putting that expression on Jiang Cheng’s face, but he held back. Despite how much he cared for his *shidi*, he had never wanted to say these words to Jiang Cheng’s face.

Perhaps in the depths of the night, he had thought these dark thoughts. Now, it was like Jin Guangyao was dragging out his darkest, dirtiest thoughts and laying them out in front of everyone. So he kept silent.

“If your relationship with Wei Wuxian had been just a little better, well. Perhaps he would have been alive today.”

Jiang Cheng inhaled sharply, his eyes suspiciously red. “I—”

“You were even the one who led the siege against Wei Wuxian, Sect Leader Jiang. So really, you aren’t as innocent of this as you’d think.”

“I did not regret what I did then.” Jiang Cheng said slowly, as though the words were costing him everything to say out loud. “But that doesn’t mean I don’t care for him.”

Alright, he had to spare Jiang Cheng of this before he was actually made to feel his emotions. Wei Ying pushed at Su She gently, sending him stumbling across the stone tiles.

“Show yourself!” Su She yelped and unsheathed his sword.

“If you say so.” Wei Ying sighed. “Ah, but it’ll take me longer if I appear normally, so why don’t we...”

And suddenly, they were no longer standing in a temple, but in a courtesan house. Banners of bright red silk hung from the ceiling, and a fog of opium smoke hung low in the air. A quiet murmur started up, and out of the corner of Wei Ying’s eyes, he could see bright silk fluttering around the corners.

“Sect Leader Jin, is this to your liking?” Wei Ying smiled. “You must want to visit her, after all.”

“Wei Wuxian. I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Jin Guangyao smiled tightly. “Hanguang-jun, did you know about this?”

Lan Zhan remained silent.

Wei Ying. We need to talk.

Why?

I have to tell you something. I—I understand if you do not feel the same way— Oh goodness. Lan Zhan was so shy suddenly, and Wei Ying decided to save Hanguang-jun’s dignity.

I know. Your brother told me everything, though he could stand to be a little less harsh with his words. Wei Ying chuckled.

Wei Ying, I—

Let me tell you something, Lan Zhan. Back then, when we were kissing in the inn, I really, really wanted to take it further. Really! But I didn’t want our first time to be so... fake, since it’s not really my body. Wei Ying winced. He should have worded that better.

Wei Ying. Speak clearly—if not for you, then for me, please.

Hanguang-jun. Lan Wangji, Lan er-gege, Lan Zhan. Back then, I really, really wanted to sleep with you. I want to night hunt with you for the rest of my life—or, er, my death. Since I’m immortal now, you have to hurry up and cultivate immortality, okay?

Lan Zhan looked like he had been struck dumb by the confession. It was lucky that they were still observing what was going on and not walking, because Wei Ying was sure that Lan Zhan would trip over his own feet or something.

“Wei Wuxian, what is the meaning of this?” Jiang Cheng demanded. “Is this another elaborate trap?”

“Aiya, Jiang Cheng, you hold so little faith in me! No, this is the resentful energy that has been lying under Guanyin Temple for a while now. I simply brought it to light, so that we can all learn about the origins of this place.” Wei Ying grinned cheerfully, gesturing to his body. “And it lets me walk around too.”

“You didn’t die?” Lan Xichen looked him up and down; Wei Ying understood the confusion. His soul looked just like he had thirteen years ago, before he died.

Wei Ying laughed. “I’m already dead, Sect Leader Lan. Have been for a while now, but thank you for noticing.”

“I didn’t—”

“He kept it a secret.” Lan Zhan murmured. “He did not wish to be hunted again.”

Su She scoffed. “I’d say he deserves to be hunted, after all that he has done!”

Lan Zhan ah, Lan Zhan. You don’t have to defend me.

Want to.

Goodness! After I’ve confessed, you’re so shameless! But maybe Wei Ying was the shameless one, since he liked it so much. Lan Zhan defending him gave him a funny feeling in his chest that made him feel warm all over.

Wei Ying poked a little further at the array; the eye of the array was inside the temple, and now, when he dabbed a little bit of blood on the Guanyin statue, the rest of the array shattered.

Resentful energy surged out, thick and cloying and smelling like overripe flowers and fruit. Wei Ying caught most of it, pulling it into himself and purifying it, but there were still ghouls forming.

All of the ghosts were scantily clad, and they were making embarrassing sounds. While Wei Ying scrambled to get them under control, he dimly heard the sounds of a sword fight, and when it stopped, he looked up.

Su She’s sword lay in three pieces on the ground, his arm completely soaked in blood. He looked like he was on his last legs, and he was currently being held at the tip of Bichen. Jin Guangyao’s throat was pressed against Lan Xichen’s sword, and the whole room was silent save for the ghosts of the courtesans and their obscene moans.

“Ah. I didn’t expect this to happen.” Wei Ying frowned. “Cover your eyes and ears, Lan Zhan, this might violate your Lan dignity.”

Lan Zhan narrowed his eyes. “Fire.”

“Yeah, there was definitely a fire here. This place burned down, and a lot of people died. Then this temple was built on top to suppress the energy. Am I right, Sect Leader Jin?” Wei Ying whistled a few notes, bringing a ghostly scene into stark relief—burned beams, charred bodies and twisted metal. They could almost smell the smoke.

Jin Guangyao let out a sound like a wounded animal as he whipped his head around, his eyes wild as he stared at the burned ghouls.

Wei Ying continued, pursing his lips and repeating the same notes. Over and over again. They echoed in the empty temple, bouncing around repeatedly until they distorted into screams. Tortured, pained screams, ringing sweetly in their ears until they faded away.

Spectral fire roared, and burning beams fell, overpowering the roaring thunderstorm outside.

“A-Yao, is the fire related to you?” Lan Xichen asked, desperation bleeding into his voice.

Jiang Cheng scoffed. “Knowing him, there’s a lower chance of him not being involved than being involved.”

“A-Yao, please explain yourself.”

“I doubt Sect Leader Jin will want to explain. But I have my ways of finding out what happened.” Empathy came easy to him now. The girls were eager to show everyone what happened, and he had more than enough energy to power a large array now.

They were back in the courtesan house again, but this time, it was at the height of its glory, with tasteful furniture everywhere and rich, embroidered rugs. About a dozen round tables rested within the hall, a couple of clients and fair-looking women sitting at each. Some had their shoulders bare, some wore unfastened hair, some sat on the customers laps, some fed wine to others. All of their expressions were soft and drunken.

It was clear what this place was at first glance.

No wonder all those ghouls were naked. They were probably all prostitutes and clients. Wei Ying wondered to himself, sending a quick prayer to them. The ghosts swirled around the prayer, and he felt a thin thread of respect coming from them.

One of the clients chuckled, “A son is a son, after all. Did the man not want him?”

One of the women traced her long, scarlet nails down his arm slowly. “She said that the man’s a big shot from a cultivational sect. Then he must have many sons in his house. Nothing is cherished that isn’t rare. Could he have cared about this one outside? She waited and waited and nobody came to get her, and so she could only raise him herself, couldn’t she? It’s been fourteen years since.”

A few of the clients were drawn into the conversation, and another one asked, "A big shot? Did such a thing really happen?"

"Oh, why would I lie to you about something like this? Her son is running errands for us right now. There, that's the one." The woman twisted her waist, waving at a boy holding a tray. "Xiao-Meng! Come here!"

The boy did as he was told and walked over. "Anxin-jie?"

All at once, Wei Ying understood everything. It was terrible knowledge, and he felt sorry for Jin Guangyao. Still, your past does not excuse your actions now, and he continued watching.

The clients scrutinised Meng Yao with judging eyes.

"Am I needed for something?" Meng Yao asked again. Even when he was younger, his tone was meek and non-confrontational.

Anxin smiled. "Xiao-Meng, are you still learning those things lately?"

Meng Yao paused, "Which things?"

"The things your mom wants you to learn, things like calligraphy, etiquette, swordsmanship, meditation... How are those things going?"

Before she even finished, the clients began to chuckle as if they found something to be funny.

Anxin turned around, berating the men gently. "Don't laugh, I'm telling the truth here. His mom's raising him as a young master of a wealthy family. She taught him how to read and write, bought him all those swordsmanship pamphlets, and even wants to send him to school."

"Send him to school? Did I hear wrong?"

"No! Xiao-Meng, tell these young masters. You've gone to the library before, haven't you?"

The client snickered. "Is he still going?"

"Nah, he came back just a few days later. He wouldn't go again no matter what. Xiao-Meng, do you not like studying or do you not like the place?"

Meng Yao didn't say anything.

Anxin giggled, poking a finger at Meng Yao's forehead, "Little one, you angry?" A light, red mark appeared in the centre of Meng Yao's forehead, almost like a shadow of a vermillion mark.

He touched his forehead, "No..."

"Enough, enough. We've got nothing for you. You can go."

Meng Yao turned around. But before he could walk more than a few steps, she picked up something from the table.

“Here’s some fruit for you.”

Meng Yao turned around and the emerald fruit hit his chest, falling to the ground and rolling away.

“Why are you so slow? Can’t even catch some fruit. Hurry and pick it up. Don’t waste it.”

Meng Yao curved the corners of his mouth. He should be fourteen already but, perhaps because he was unusually small, he seemed to be only twelve or thirteen. It was extremely uncomfortable seeing such a smile appear on his face.

Wei Ying had seen a smile like this before, when he was dealing with particularly difficult sect matters. It spooked him now to see the same smile on a young child.

He bent down slowly, picked up the fruit, and wiped it on his clothes, his smile even wider.

“Thank you, Anxin-jie.”

“No worries. Go work hard.”

“Call me if you need me.”

After he walked away, one of the clients commented, “If my son were at such a place, I’d take him back no matter what.”

Someone else chimed in, “His father was really a big shot from a cultivational sect? Shouldn’t it be more than easy to buy a prostitute’s freedom and give her some money to raise her son? He’d never even need to lift a pinky finger.”

Anxin sighed. “You can’t believe everything this woman says, can you? No matter what, that big shot only exists in her words. In my opinion, it might’ve just been a well-off merchant before she exaggerated so much...”

Suddenly, someone screamed. The sound of cups and saucers shattering on the ground came from the second floor as a guqin crashed down, smashing to pieces as it hit the centre of the hall. It scared the wits out of the people enjoying themselves at the nearby tables.

Anxin almost tripped. “What happened?!”

Meng Yao wailed. “Mom!”

Anxin looked up. A burly man dragged a woman out of a room by her hair. Anxin tugged the client beside her, but no one could tell whether she was nervous or excited. “She’s at it again!”

Meng Yao rushed upstairs. Covering her scalp, the woman tried her hardest to pull her clothes up her shoulders. When she saw Meng Yao run over, she shooed him away. “I told

you not to come upstairs! Go down! Go down this instant!”

Meng Yao went to peel away the client’s hands as he received a kick in the stomach and rolled down the stairs, causing a wave of exclamations.

Wei Ying groaned. Good grief, this was some cruel, cruel irony. First here, then at Golden Carp Tower? This was the third time Wei Ying saw him roll down flights of stairs from a kick.

With a shrill scream, the woman had her hair pulled by the client again, all the way until she was dragged downstairs, stripped, and tossed onto the street. He spat on her naked body, cursing, “Hags do nothing but haggle—an old whore thinks she’s fresh meat!”

Panicking, the woman lay prone in the centre of the street, too afraid to get up. With one move, everyone would see everything. The passersby on the street were both astonished and thrilled, lingering as they pointed with glinting eyes. The doors to the brothel were also cramped with the women inside, chuckling as they told the story of the poor old woman to their clients just like Anxin did. Only one of the ladies squeezed through the doors.

She took off the gauze robe that was already flimsy to begin with, revealing half of her chest bound only by a crimson slip. She was more than eye-catching and everyone hurried to take a look at her.

The lady spat, cursing at the crowds. “Keep on looking, you bastards! Do you have the right to look at someone like me? With each look you gotta pay—where’s the money?! Come, where’s the money?!”

As she cursed, she reached out and asked the bystanders for money. The crowd dispersed somewhat, and she threw the robe she took off onto the woman, the two of them staggering into the main hall.

As she walked, she scolded the other woman, though Wei Ying could see it was more for show than anything else. “It’s been so long since I’ve told you to change things up. What’s the pride for? You’ve had your lesson, huh? Remember it next time!”

Wei Ying thought the woman somehow looked a bit familiar. Where had he seen her before?

The woman whispered, “A-Yao, A-Yao...”

From the kick, Meng Yao wasn’t able to get up for a long time, still lying on the ground. The lady grabbed one with each hand and dragged away both mother and son.

A client beside Anxin inquired, “Who’s the pretty one?”

Anxin spat out two sunflower seed shells. “A famous vixen. She’s quite scary.”

Someone sighed in disappointment. “This is the talented Meng Shi from back then? How did she end up like this?”

Anxin's bright red lips twisted into a thin smile. "She is. She was set on bearing a child. Could a woman keep up her looks after she gives birth? If not because of her past name of being 'talented', there might not be anyone who comes to her. I say it's all because of the books."

A client showed his deep understanding, "Of course. Those who've touched ink always have that inexplicable pride with them. They don't want to give up the notion."

"If she could feed herself with the books she's read, then I wouldn't be saying anything, but it's just a gimmick to attract men after all. I'm gonna be blunt here—we're all just pretty faces, and you're better just because you've read some books? What's the pride for? Not only do the people outside look down on her, do you think our other sisters here like her either? The clients here sometimes choose to see a young maiden keep up her modesty as a change of pace but who'd pay for an old, ugly one? It's been a long time since her fame dwindled. Everyone knows, and she's the only one who doesn't understand..."

At this point, someone tapped Anxin from behind. As Anxin turned around, she saw the lady from back then stand behind her, raising her hand to slap. Anxin took the slap, since she had no time to dodge. She stood stock still for a moment before her temper caught up with her. "You whore!!!"

The lady shouted back. "You whore! Chit-chatting every single day—does that tongue of yours have nothing else to do?!"

"What did I say that has to do with you?!"

The two women fought, both with words and with their nails. The vulgarity of their words were almost intolerable to the ear.

Many of the prostitutes came to stop them, struggling to get in between the two women and pull them apart. "Sisi! Stop it!"

Sisi? Wei Ying finally realised why he felt familiarity when he saw the lady's face. With seven or eight scars over her face, he could see the woman who had come to Lotus Pier to disgrace Jin Guangyao with startling clarity.

Suddenly, he felt a wave of heat crash into his face. The entire hall had at once sunken into an ocean of fiery red. Wei Ying immediately pulled them out of Empathy.

The silence that followed was awful.

Chapter 39

Chapter Summary

At this point canon is an afterthought now lmao

Wei Ying was the first to break the silence.

“I’m guessing this was where Sect Leader Jin grew up?”

“You really started the fire?” Lan Xichen sounded defeated.

“Yes.”

Jiang Cheng sneered. “You’re just acknowledging it like that? No smooth lies and pretty words?”

“At this point, would it make a difference if I were to plead that I wasn’t guilty?”

Lan Xichen raised a hand, silencing Jiang Cheng. “Was it to remove the traces?”

“No.” Jin Guangyao glanced towards Lan Xichen almost nervously. “Aren’t you going to ask me why I did it?”

“I believe you had your reasons. But you have done too much, and... I no longer trust myself to believe anything you say.”

Jin Guangyao collapsed to his knees, shocking everyone present. “*Er-ge*, I’m sorry.”

“Aiya, can’t we just fight? Please? It’s easier than this.” Wei Ying pleaded, his eyes darting from side to side. No one listened to him, but he could feel Lan Zhan’s wholehearted agreement through their mental communication array and he stifled a smile.

Lan Zhan had always been the same, so unsure of how to step if he had to tangle with emotions and matters of the heart. Wei Ying muttered as such to Lan Zhan through the array, and somehow, Lan Zhan managed to convey a quirk of his lips entirely through the array. That was something new.

“*Er-ge*, you’ve known me for so many years. No matter what I do, I’ve always treated you nicely. I don’t want the position of Chief Cultivator anymore, and I’ve destroyed the Stygian Tiger Amulet already. After tonight, I’ll go away, so won’t you spare me?”

“Sect Leader Jin, you said that the Stygian Tiger Amulet is destroyed. May I take a look?”

Jin Guangyao raised his head, and there was a faint ghost of a smile on his face. “Young master Wei, it took an extraordinary amount of effort to restore this dark amulet, and even then, it was only good for a couple of uses. Did you really think I’d carry around a piece of scrap metal with me?”

Wei Ying shrugged. “You could have found another Xue Yang. I wouldn’t put it past you.”

Jin Guangyao turned back to Lan Xichen. “*Er-ge*, I’m really not lying.”

Lan Xichen sighed. “I already told you that when you schemed against us in the Burial Mounds, there was no need to call me *Er-ge* anymore.”

“What happened at the Burial Mounds was a mistake, *Er-ge*. But what’s done is done, and I can’t go back anymore.”

“What do you mean?”

“Brother, do not engage in unnecessary conversation.”

“Lan Zhan is right. Sect Leader Jin has a silver tongue; if you let him speak his case, you’ll find yourself nodding along to his words.” But even Wei Ying could see that Lan Xichen wouldn’t budge. It was his fairness and willingness to listen to everyone that made him such a good mediator.

It would also be his downfall.

Jin Guangyao took a deep breath. “I received a letter.”

“What letter?” Lan Xichen leaned forward.

“It was a threat. It said... It said that those *things* would be revealed to the world in seven days. I was given two choices. Turn myself in and apologise, or wait for my imminent death.”

“Even so, you didn’t have to resort to murder! You could—”

“I could do what? What could I do? Wait for all of my secrets to be aired to the world, then apologise to the world? Be trampled into the ground as I keep a smile on my face? *Er-ge*, there was no other way!”

“You brought this upon yourself, did you not? You did all of those things in the letter. If you never did those things, how could anyone hold it against you?”

“I don’t deny that I did those things—”

“You can’t! The evidence is right there!”

“I said I didn’t!” Jin Guangyao cried, his face streaked with tears and desperation fraying his voice. “I don’t deny anything that I’ve done, but I had reasons for them! Do you take me for insane, *Er-ge*? My wife, my father, my son, my brother—did you think that I killed them all for entertainment?”

Lan Xichen took a deep breath and closed his eyes. “I will ask you a few questions. Do you swear to answer them truthfully?”

“Brother,” Lan Zhan said, his voice low and strangled. He unsheathed Bichen, but Wei Ying patted his arm and kicked at Su She, who was attempting to move.

“There is nothing to worry about. He is disarmed and all of his associates are down. I’m sure your brother can take care of this while we get Su She out of here.” Wei Ying glanced down, beaming at the sight of an outraged expression on his face.

“First, about your father. Did you really—”

“—I’d like to answer this question last, *Er-ge*.” Jin Guangyao interrupted, his face carefully blank and devoid of emotion.

Lan Xichen took a shaky breath and continued. “Second, your wife... Qin Su. Did you marry her knowing full well your relationship with her?”

The atmosphere in the temple had changed. Everyone was hanging onto the words of this damned confession, and Jin Guangyao’s face crumpled.

“Yes,” he whispered, closing his eyes.

“Fuck.” Jiang Cheng said, rather eloquently in Wei Ying's opinion.

“I had no choice.” Jin Guangyao began desperately, but Lan Xichen cut him off. Wei Ying didn’t think that he’d ever seen him so angry.

“How could you have no choice? It was your marriage; you would have gotten a say in it! It would be fine if you didn’t marry her! She cared for you, A-Yao! And you broke her heart in return!

“You think I didn’t know that? There was no time to call the marriage off! I found out only days before the wedding, and if I called it off now, after spending so long to legitimise the marriage, I would have been ruined! And A-Su, she—” Jin Guangyao broke off with a wretched sob. “—I never touched her after the wedding, I swear. A-Song... A-Song happened before we married.”

Wei Ying silently cursed Jin Guangshan and his promiscuity in his head. His... attention towards pretty women was well known in the cultivation world, but to think it stretched to this extent...

“Third question. Did you set up Jin Zixuan to die at Qiongqi Path?”

Jin Ling quietly whimpered, and Jiang Cheng whispered a gruff assurance. Wei Ying made eye contact with Jiang Cheng, and he hoped that his guilt could be seen. Jin Ling deserved to know, awful as the truth might be.

“Brother, do you believe him?” Lan Zhan murmured quietly.

“I did run into Jin Zixuan on purpose.”

Jin Ling clenched his fists, and Jiang Chang muttered something else into his ear.

“But I never meant for him to die there; only to sustain injury. How was I supposed to know that young master Wei would slaughter everyone there?” He nodded towards Wei Ying, who was valiantly trying to stop himself from ending Jin Guangyao right there and then.

“And you say you didn’t plan this after saying you met Jin Zixuan on purpose?” Wei Ying scoffed. “Please, you’re contradicting yourself.”

“Why!?” Jin Ling shouted suddenly, lunging forward, Nie Huaisang grabbed at his sleeve, but it was too late. The boy leapt towards Jin Guangyao, who whipped out a thin, red string and wrapped it around his throat.

“Everyone, please remain calm.” Jin Guangyao smiled pleasantly, although his expression faltered slightly when he caught sight of Lan Xichen. “A-Ling, you asked me why? Then let me ask you something. Why is it that two sons, born on the same day, were treated so differently? Why is it that I was kicked down the stairs by his subordinate while another one of his son’s celebrated his birthday? Why was it that he sent me on the riskiest suicide missions? Why? Why is it your father, and never me?”

“Jin Guangyao!” Jiang Cheng roared, and Jin Ling whimpered.

“Stay right there, Sect Leader Jiang. If you listen to what I say, no one needs to get hurt. A-Ling is my nephew; I’d sooner die than harm him.”

“If it’s a hostage you want, then take me.” Jiang Cheng hissed.

“Unfortunately, Sect Leader Jiang, you’re not an easy hostage, so I’m afraid I must—”

Bang.

“—decline.”

All heads turned to the door. The rain was still pouring, but they distinctly heard the sound of someone knocking.

Bang. Bang. Bang bang.

BangbangBANGBANGBANGBANGBANGBANGBANGBANGBANG.

BANG.

The doors flew open, revealing a muscled body barely covered by a thin shroud. Even though there was no head, they could feel the baleful glare that the ghost gave them all.

Wei Ying grabbed Lan Zhan’s hand. “It’s Chifeng-jun! What’s he doing here?”

“Da-ge!” Nie Huaisang wailed in horror.

“Da-ge.” Both Lan Xichen and Jin Guangyao murmured, seemingly unaware that they had done so.

The body lunged forward, and the group scattered.

“Wei Wuxian!” Jiang Cheng shouted, tossing something to him. He caught it instinctively, but the moment he touched it, resentful energy surged out of it.

Chenqing.

Wei Ying lifted it to his lips and played, diving headfirst into the maelstrom of energy that practically cloaked the corpse. It was wound tightly around him, like a mass of tangled thread, and with *Chenqing*, he teased the strings apart slowly.

“Su She!” Nie Huaisang’s strangled cry came, and Wei Ying’s attention wavered. Not for long, but it was enough for Nie Mingjue to backhand Su She into a wall. The man flew across the temple, hitting the wall with an earthshaking thud and sliding down onto the floor. He left a dark smear behind, and Wei Ying turned back to the current problem at hand.

“Da-ge!” Nie Huaisang wailed, but the sound of Wangji drowned out his cries, rising to match *Chenqing* in volume. Lan Xichen joined shortly after, and the three of them slowly pushed the corpse towards the now empty coffin.

Wei Ying reached out and pushed the corpse in, then pressed his thumb against Bichen and drew an array on the lid, his blood flashing black once before settling down to red. He turned. He paused.

“Lan Zhan.”

“Wei Ying.” He sounded decidedly unrepentant.

“Did you cut off Jin Guangyao’s arm?”

Lan Zhan’s grip tightened on Bichen. “Jin Ling’s life matters.”

Jiang Cheng was checking Jin Ling’s throat over for any lacerations, and he visibly sagged with relief when he saw that he was unharmed.

Jin Guangyao coughed, then choked out blood, splattering it across Jin Ling’s front.

“Jin Ling, stand a little farther from dangerous people, ah?” Wei Ying muttered, reaching out and pulling the boy away. He was trembling like a rabbit, and Wei Ying shushed him gently. He’d seen these signs in war before, when civilians were exposed to the horrors of the battlefield.

No child should have to go through that again.

“*Er-ge* ...” Jin Guangyao pleaded.

Lan Xichen was frozen.

Then Wen Ning burst through the door, his eyes wild and his veins protruding from his neck.

Chapter 40

Chapter Summary

Hi I need you all to come with me and look at [this](#). Someone (thank you, haloQii) made fanart!!! I have fanart!!! And it's amazing!!! Look!!!

Y'all get a coffin scene, but there's no need to thank me ;p

Also!! 100k words!! This is the most I've ever written :0

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“Oh come on!” Wei Ying shouted. “Can’t a ghost get a break around here?”

Wen Ning snarled, and Lan Zhan nudged Wei Ying gently.

“Baxia.”

Wei Ying looked over Wen Ning, realising that the sabre was indeed Baxia, Nie Mingjue’s weapon. Nie Huaisang let out a little whimper at the sight, and the muted thud signified that he had fainted. Wei Ying ignored all that, prodding the mental bond that he had with the fierce corpse. But it seemed to stop suddenly, like a trail gone cold at the edge of a cliff.

Wen Ning lunged towards Jin Ling, raising Baxia. Jin Ling shrieked and threw his arms up, but Wen Ning’s other hand came up and grabbed the blade. Blood dripped sluggishly down the blade, and his eyes cleared for an instant.

“Young master Wei,” Wen Ning gasped. “Baxia, she—”

“I got it, I got it!” Wei Ying fumbled for the stack of talismans that he had stored away, and with a quick burst of qi, activated all of them. They glowed, fluttering out of the stack to circle Wen Ning and contain him while absorbing the resentful energy. Wei Ying connected the talismans to his... well, he was dead, so he didn’t have a working dantian anymore, but he could still purify the resentful energy.

“Young master Jin, please get out from under Baxia.” Wen Ning gritted out, the blade cutting deeper into his palm. “I don’t know... how long I can... hold on—!”

“Jin Ling!” Jiang Cheng grabbed Jin Ling, Zidian ready if Wen Ning were to—

“A-Yao!” Lan Xichen sounded absolutely anguished, grabbing at Jin Guangyao’s arm. “What are you doing?”

“What I should have done years ago!” Jin Guangyao snarled. “Let me go, *Er-ge* !”

“Nie Mingjue is your *da-ge* ! Our *da-ge* !” Lan Xichen argued. “How could you?”

“How could I? Yes, of course! Blame the son of a prostitute, right? That’s all I ever am! The son of a whore, and a convenient scapegoat!” Jin Guangyao wrenched himself free of Lan Xichen’s grasp, shaking violently. The severed stump of his arm was still bleeding, and his face was ghastly pale.

“A-Yao...” Lan Xichen looked pitiful as he reached out to Jin Guangyao.

Jin Guangyao flinched away. “Don’t touch me. Don’t. You’ll dirty your hands, *Er-ge* .”

“Young master Wei...” Wen Ning’s voice was strained, and it dragged him away from the melodrama long enough to wrest Baxia from his hand. Wei Ying laid the sword on the ground, kneeling by it and reaching out to the spirit.

Piss off.

“Feisty.” Wei Ying murmured. “But you *will* listen to me.”

The blade rattled violently, recognising Wei Ying as a ghost—which, okay, he was, but just because he was saturated in resentful energy didn’t make him a resentful ghost. Baxia was drawn to him, and he could feel the beast core yearning to fight him.

“Aiya, Baxia. You have to calm down, and then we can get you somewhere where you can fight for all eternity.” Wei Ying grabbed *Chenqing* and blew, playing a slow, soothing melody.

Slowly, the spirit calmed down, and the rattling of the blade lessened.

“There we go.” Wei Ying muttered. Then, to the rest of the group, but more to Jin Guangyao specifically: “We need Nie Mingjue’s head. He can’t rest in peace like this, and the seal that I drew won’t last long.”

“Young master Wei, surely you don’t think—”

“I don’t think that you have it. I know it.” Wei Ying smiled pleasantly. “I sensed it the moment I became a ghost. Take it out, Jin Guangyao.”

“I don’t—”

“A-Yao.” Lan Xichen croaked. “Please.”

Jin Guangyao reached into his qiankun sleeves with shaky hands, pulling out a small pouch. He opened it, and the coffin rattled. Everyone held their breaths, looking at the seals with a ghoulish interest.

But they held firm, at least until Wei Ying reached over and unsealed it again, allowing Nie Mingjue’s body to barrel towards the head. It grabbed the head, pulling it onto the neck, and

Jin Ling resisted the urge to gag when the stitches came alive and crawled towards the head, attaching it on.

The resentful energy coming from the corpse increased tenfold, and Baxia flew towards its true master, practically shaking with bloodlust.

“Oh no.” Wei Ying muttered. “This is not good.”

Nie Mingjue’s mouth opened, and a wet, choking cry emerged from his throat, heralded by a torrent of black blood. He charged towards Jin Ling, raising his sword. Jiang Cheng shouted hoarsely, raising Zidian, but Wen Ning was faster.

He darted in between Baxia and Jin Ling, pushing the boy back and taking the cursed blade through the chest. Although he was dead and could feel no pain, Wei Ying still winced when Nie Mingjue ripped Baxia out of his chest cruelly. Wen Ning dropped like a puppet, and Nie Mingjue turned to Jin Guangyao.

He lunged, but Wei Ying reached out, coating his hands in resentful energy and pulling. It was a desperate attempt, but he managed to sink his hands into Nie Mingjue’s spiritual consciousness and haul it out of the body. Baxia was at the centre of the dark green maelstrom, shaking so hard it almost hit Wei Ying several times.

Again, he pushed the sword into the coffin, redrawing the seals, but his body in this form was weak. It couldn’t seal Nie Mingjue, and if he mixed spiritual energy in with the resentful energy, the resulting combination might be beneficial...or it could backfire badly.

No, he would take the burden entirely on himself. Lan Zhan would keep him safe. He—he wouldn’t die if his ashes were with Lan Zhan. Nie Mingjue was almost out of control now, and no matter how terrible the situation was, he could not let Nie Huaisang’s brother go down like this.

So he reached into Nie Mingjue’s soul, maintaining a firm grip on his mind so that he would not dissipate or escape. He worked quickly, sketching and remodelling arrays over the broken ones and wrangling the slippery soul filled with resentful energy into the coffin. Stone was a natural dampener, so it would help to some extent. He barely heard Lan Zhan’s agonised scream before the coffin lid closed over him and he was plunged into total darkness.

“Wei Ying!” Something crashed against the coffin, and he heard—more like felt—Lan Zhan’s cries.

“Aiya, Lan Zhan.” Wei Ying mumbled. “Stop trying to harm yourself to save me.”

And he surrendered to the cool darkness.

He fought. Wei Ying didn’t know how long he fought for, pressing Nie Mingjue’s spirit down and trying to get rid of all the resentful energy. Sometimes, he thought he could hear a familiar song in the distance, and that made him fight harder, syphoning out the resentful energy bit by bit.

Sometimes, he could even taste Emperor's Smile in the back of his throat, and he heard prayers. Prayers for his soul, for Nie Mingjue's wellbeing, and the loudest one—his name.

Simply his name, repeated over and over again, infused with so much grief that it resonated with Wei Ying. But he'd recognise that voice anywhere. He started to call back, just calling his name.

Lan Zhan, Lan Zhan, Lan Zhan! I'm here, I'm here! I hear you!

Nie Mingjue's soul had been diminished, lately, and it gave Wei Ying some time to catch his breath. During these times, he'd chatter away, following that thread that would inevitably lead him to... well, he didn't know, but it was warm and light and it smelt like sandalwood.

Then, he'd start talking.

Lan Zhan, I've come to you today because Nie Mingjue's been very quiet lately. So I can talk to you! Isn't that interesting? Tell me what's going on outside? Ahh, I forget, you can't hear me, but that's okay, you calling my name is enough. This place is so bright and warm, you know. It's so nice, and so different from being in a coffin.

But inevitably, Nie Mingjue would rise again, and he would have to bid Lan Zhan a bittersweet goodbye. It never got easier, each time he had to retreat to the darkness of the coffin made him crave the light more.

Tell Sizhui I said hello! And Jin Ling, and Zichen, and Jingyi, and Jiang Cheng and Wen Ning and Wen Qing—oh, do you still visit Ghost City? If you do, say hi to Hua qianbei and Xie da-ge for me! And Mo Xuanyu! Tell him I haven't forgotten, okay? I'll come back, I promise.

He dreamed, in the coffin. Or perhaps they were visions, from when his spirit gained enough strength to leave the coffin where he had tied both his and Nie Mingjue's souls together.

Lan Zhan looked so tired, and with a start, he realised that he had become the Chief Cultivator.

Aiya, Lan Zhan. Wei Ying murmured, sitting in on one of the many meetings that he had. *You look so tired. Have you been eating and sleeping well, ah?*

He reached out, brushing his thumb over Lan Zhan's eyebags. Unbidden, a song poured forth from him. He didn't know where the lyrics came from, but it followed a well worn path; not the single plank path that he was used to, but a road well travelled.

Lan Zhan stirred, his eyes moving around the room slowly. Wei Ying felt a smile lift his lips when Lan Zhan made eye contact with him, but he didn't expect the slight smile back.

Wei Ying would forever remember the day that Nie Mingjue finally settled. His soul gave a quiet exhale, and it seemed to resign itself to its fate.

Are you ready? Wei Ying asked.

Yes , came the weary reply.

The coffin opened, the stone lid crashing to the ground with an earth shattering sound. Wei Ying basically crawled out, his soul exhausted. Nie Mingjue was similarly exhausted, but he was only suppressed, not completely burned out.

But there were warm hands lifting him, running fingers through his matted and filthy hair—oh, when did he get a corporeal form again?—and massaging his feet, warm yang and yin energy flowing through him.

But all of that was brutally ripped away again, and the coquettish giggles of the courtesans rang in his ears. Why were they here? He—he was in the coffin, wasn't he?

Gege, thank you for freeing us, but where are we now?

Wei Ying was confused and in pain. Where was he? There was a startling absence of sandalwood, and he—he was so confused. He wanted to be back with Lan Zhan—did they take him away? There was so much light and sound, and from what he could see, there were people, but they weren't doing anything, just surrounding him.

He lifted *Chenqing* and blew.

Chapter End Notes

look out for a new fic dropping in the series! LWJ's POV, aftermath :D

Chapter 41

Chapter Summary

Help my hand slipped and suddenly I have 2k words of a canon divergence yiling wei sect au written HELP

“Gege. I’m worried about Wei Ying.” Hua Cheng looked up from his golden foil palace, just in time to see Xie Lian hide a smile. “What?”

“Nothing, it’s just—” Xie Lian sighed dramatically. “—my San Lang is all grown up now, caring for his disciples.”

“Wei Ying is not my disciple, gege.” Hua Cheng muttered, but he knew it was a futile attempt at dissuading his beloved. Xie Lian always saw right through him.

“Uhm... excuse me, Xie *daozhang*?” Mo Xuanyu peeked out from around a corner, one of his hands worrying the hem of his robes incessantly. “I received a prayer from Lan Wang—Hanguang-jun.”

Xie Lian frowned, and Hua Cheng longed to reach out and press his fingers against the furrow in his brow.

“What did he ask for?”

“Protection, for one... ah! Wei qianbei!” Mo Xuanyu looked up. “Should we go check in on him?”

Xie Lian exhaled. “Yes, I think we should. You too, Xuanyu. San Lang, are you...”

“Where gege goes, I’ll follow.” Hua Cheng smiled sweetly. “If gege wants this one to follow him off a cliff, San Lang will gladly do so.”

“Ah, please don’t. Let’s go and see what Wei Ying got himself into again, shall we?” Hua Cheng accepted Xie Lian’s proffered hand and beckoned Mo Xuanyu closer, looking over the spirit with a critical eye.

Mo Xuanyu had befriended the lady ghosts, who had seen the shy ghost and immediately decided to adopt him. When Hua Cheng had first summoned the boy, he had been wearing makeup that made him look like a hanged ghost. Now, after the lady ghosts’ careful guidance, he had learned how to soften the hard lines of his face and posture with new clothes and makeup.

It seemed to make him more confident too, so Hua Cheng let him continue. Ghost City was meant to be a place where you could feel accepted, after all.

They stepped through the portal, and the clean cut lines and cool palette was a shocking contrast to the dark reds and varnished blacks of Ghost City. In the centre of the room, a large stone coffin stood. The lid had various arrays drawn over it, but most of them...

“Gege.”

Xie Lian nodded. “All of these are meant to keep what’s inside from breaking out. But there’s something strange about it.”

“Wei qianbei.” Mo Xuanyu stepped towards the arrays, circling the stone coffin and inspecting every inch of it. “These were made by Wei qianbei. And... I think he’s the only one who can unlock this array without destroying everything inside.”

“How do you know?” Xie Lian reached out, pausing only when Hua Cheng grabbed his sleeve in warning. “San Lang, it’s alright. I just wanted to touch it. See, the coffin is cold.”

“Wei qianbei... I’ve read some of his works before. This functions like a sealing array, but it can only seal an entire room against outsiders, leaving only a ‘door’, or an exit to the array. Only those whose spiritual signatures that are recognised can pass through.” Mo Xuanyu explained. “Right now, only Wei qianbei’s signature can unlock this.”

Hua Cheng whistled. “That’s a powerful array. Where is he then?”

Mo Xuanyu pointed. “Inside the coffin.”

The door opened behind them, and quick as a flash, Ruoye shot out, binding the person who had stepped in.

“Hua *Chengzhu* . Xie *daozhang* . *Guniang* .” Lan Wangji looked surprisingly calm for someone who had just been wrapped head to toe in bandages just seconds ago. “May I ask if you are here to help Wei Ying?”

Oh. *Oh* . Hua Cheng recognised that hope. He took a closer look at the man. He was wearing more elaborate robes—a promotion, perhaps—but his eyes betrayed the deep fatigue in them. His hands were shaking slightly, and there was a faint smell of blood around him, underneath the sandalwood.

“Mo Xuanyu?” Hua Cheng gestured the ghost forward, smirking a little when Lan Wangji blinked. He may not be the best in parsing out his microexpressions, but Hua Cheng was nothing if not a quick learner.

“Greetings, Hanguang-jun. I’m Mo Xuanyu.” He peeked up nervously, and when Lan Wangji didn’t react, he cleared his throat and gestured towards the coffin. “Could you tell us what happened?”

“Wei Ying. He—” Lan Wangji closed his eyes. “It’s a long story.”

“We have time.” Xie Lian said gently.

Lan Wangji led them to an area behind the buildings, where small wooden hutches were lined along one side of the clearing. He sank to his knees, and a veritable swarm of bunnies surrounded him. He petted them, producing treats from his sleeves and feeding some of them.

“Rabbits?” Hua Cheng wondered, taking a seat.

“Wei Ying gifted these to me.”

Being ghosts meant that animals were naturally skittish, so they gave Mo Xuanyu and Hua Cheng a wide berth. He didn’t mind, though Mo Xuanyu seemed devastated by the knowledge.

“Would you like to start now?” Xie Lian asked, and Hua Cheng took a moment to admire his god surrounded by bunnies, looking just like the Moon Goddess of the legends.

Lan Wangji was not a man of many words. His recount of the events was clinical, cold and succinct. But he lingered softly on Wei Ying’s name, and when he talked about him, there was an undeniable softness in his eyes.

“You care deeply for Wei Ying.” Hua Cheng said quietly.

Lan Wangji looked down at the blissed out rabbit in his hands. “I do. Very much. I cannot bear the thought of losing Wei Ying again.”

“And you won’t. But he must have a reason for locking himself into a coffin with another resentful soul, and you must trust in him. Wei Ying has never been anything more than extraordinary.” Xie Lian set the rabbit down. “I know you have prayed to me, but this is far beyond me. Heavenly trials come in many shapes and sizes, after all.”

Lan Wangji’s head shot up. “Wei Ying is ascending?”

“Not yet. Only if he passes the trial, which I have no doubt he will.” Xie Lian sighed. “I hope everything is going fine on your end?”

Lan Wangji stiffened. “Everything is going fine,” he said in the manner of a man where everything was going wrong.

“Hanguang-jun, forgive me for asking, but...is Jin Guangyao dead?” Mo Xuanyu piped up timidly. He squirmed when Lan Wangji turned his head to look at the ghost.

“No. Wei Ying saved him. He is awaiting further trial and possible execution.” Lan Wangji didn’t look like the person to try and attempt a murder, but for his loved one? That did the trick.

“Gege.” Hua Cheng murmured, reaching out to Xie Lian. “Let’s leave these two.”

“Okay.”

Mo Xuanyu came back a few hours later, cautiously optimistic that he had made a new friend.

“I think we really hit it off! Then again, maybe it was because he thought I looked a little like Wei qianbei?”

Regardless, the next few weeks were spent in relative calm, with Mo Xuanyu dropping in and out of Ghost City bearing news about the cultivation world.

Jin Guangyao being sentenced to death. Jin Guangyao dying. Mo Xuanyu had expressed both glee and sorrow over this fact. Jin Ling becoming the new leader of the Lanling Jin sect.

And they received nothing about Wei Wuxian until one night, when Hua Cheng was getting ready for bed and Xie Lian received a message from Heaven.

“What?” Xie Lian sat upright, and Hua Cheng reached out to press his finger to Xie Lian’s temple.

“—paging through the entire Heavens, Your Highness!” Ling Wen sounded frazzled. “We need your help. Crimson Rain, I know you’re there too, please. The newcomer isn’t—they aren’t listening.”

“Gege.” Hua Cheng murmured.

“Let’s go.”

The Heavens were usually polished and gleaming, glittering with gold and silver and jewels. Now? It was a battlefield.

Hua Cheng could *taste* the resentful energy, cold and metallic in the air. They didn’t need to do much, just to follow the trail of destruction. There were no bodies either, which was surprising given the devastation wrought on the paths and palaces.

There, they found him.

God, demon, ghost, or spirit—no one could tell. All Hua Cheng could see was darkness, shadows dripping off his thin frame and blood red eyes opening in the ink, blinking lazily. The resentful energy howled, tearing through the streets, and it was then did Hua Cheng realise why no one was hurt.

“They’re all in the court,” Xie Lian breathed, looking at the man before them. They knew him, of course. In his worst, in his best... Hua Cheng would never forget those silvery grey eyes.

But now, they were stained almost black with red, and his skin was unnaturally pale, to the point of greyness. His fingers were throttling a black dizi, black blood dripping from his palms where he had cut himself on the sharp edges of black jade.

Wei Ying turns to them, a flicker of recognition lighting up before being brutally snuffed out by the red. Still, they stand stock still as Wei Ying plods towards them, one step at a time.

Until he sinks to his knees and knocks his forehead against the path. The sound rang out in the fragile silence, and his voice was so torn and tattered when he finally spoke.

“Hua *qianbei* ... this lowly disciple hopes you can forgive him for not coming sooner.” Wei Ying rasps. “I just-”

And Hua Cheng was moving, following the white of Xie Lian’s robes as they lifted Wei Ying and engulfed him in a hug. Wei Ying chokes something out; it is sticky and stains Hua Cheng’s robes, but he couldn’t care less.

“Wei Ying, never apologise for being too late.” Xie Lian smiles, though his eyes were shiny with tears. “We can wait. We’re very patient, aren’t we, San Lang?”

“En.” Hua Cheng barely keeps his voice from trembling. He could feel the pain and fatigue emanating from him.

Wei Ying laughs, but it is a sad facsimile of how bright he used to sound. “Then...this one will say thank you. For waiting for me.”

"Go to sleep, Wei Ying." Hua Cheng patted his back. "You've worked hard."

Chapter 42

Chapter Summary

short chapter, but I'm here with a spot of shameless self promotion. This fic is coming to an end, and I've started a new fic, called Sunrise. It's got yiling wei sect. It's got canon divergence. It's got that signature wangxian flavoured misunderstandings. It's got lwj's internal pining. It's got the Wen siblings.

That being said, don't feel pressured to check it out ^^

For the first time in a while, Wei Ying wakes up in a soft bed. Really wakes up, not like those false dreams and painful nightmares that haunt him while he was in the coffin. He had been stripped of his bloodied and old robes, which, okay, a little weird, but Wei Ying was adaptable.

Then Lan Zhan walked through the door, and all the breath left Wei Ying in a gust of air. Lan Zhan. He was here.

“Lan Zhan.”

“Wei Ying.”

“Is this real? Am I—this isn’t a dream, right?” Wei Ying scrambled out of the silk sheets, and Lan Zhan abandoned his tray to help him to the table.

“Not a dream.” Lan Zhan confirmed. “I have been waiting for one month and twelve days.”

Wei Ying couldn’t help it. He leaned forward, capturing Lan Zhan’s lips in a soft kiss. It was chaste, but when he pulled away, worried that Lan Zhan would not love him.

But his fears were unfounded when Lan Zhan pressed back, his tongue darting out to lick Wei Ying's lower lip.

"Aiya, Lan Zhan. What did I do to deserve you, hm? I must have used up three lifetimes of good karma for you."

"Wei Ying deserves the world. If Wei Ying used three lifetimes of good karma, then I must have done many good things in my past life to meet Wei Ying."

"Lan Zhan!!" Wei Ying covered his face with his hands. "You can’t just say these things with a straight face, oh my god, Lan Zhan..."

"It is true. In every universe, I will find Wei Ying." Lan Zhan declared, as if he hadn't just turned Wei Ying's view on the world upside down. "Even if it takes me a lifetime."

"What about two, then?" Wei Ying challenged.

"Mn."

"Three?"

"Mn."

"...four?"

"Wei Ying." Lan Zhan's eyes held immeasurable fondness for him, and Wei Ying felt his heart melt under that clear gaze. "I will be yours in every lifetime, if you will have me."

Despite his sweet words, there was a question; well hidden, but Lan Zhan could no more hide from Wei Ying than Wei Ying from Lan Zhan.

"Of course I'll be yours. You'll be mine too, in every lifetime. I want to night hunt with you for the rest of my life, remember?"

Wei Ying had to do it. He had to. "Lan Zhan, I'm sorry, I—"

Lan Zhan shushes him. "No need."

"But I—"

"Xie *dao*zhang explained the circumstances to me." Lan Zhan looked at Wei Ying in wonder and awe, and Wei Ying couldn't very well fight the blush that rose now, could he?

"Wei Ying, I will wait for you for as long as it takes."

"Aiya, Lan Zhan, at this point, we might as well get married."

To his surprise, Lan Zhan shakes his head. "Not yet."

"Not yet?" Wei Ying echoed, though his heart gave a funny little flip when he hears the promise in those two words.

"Wait for me?" Lan Zhan said pleadingly.

"What? Why?"

"Wei Ying is immortal now. He will no longer age or die. I wish to be with him for all eternity."

"But... you'll be alone." Wei Ying muttered. "I don't know how long it will take."

Lan Zhan shrugged, and the action was so utterly unlike him that Wei Ying had to stop and stare for a moment.

“I have you.” Lan Zhan murmured, holding out the jade pendant that Wei Ying had given him a lifetime ago.

“Lan Zhan, you really...”

“Eat. You may be a ghost now, but your body is still unused to going without sustenance for a long time.” Lan Zhan nudged the food in Wei Ying’s direction, and they settled down, finishing the food that had long since gone cold.

“So, tell me what’s been going on recently. I’ve been stuck in a coffin for so long, and—oh my god. Is Chifeng-jun okay?”

“His soul has entered the reincarnation cycle.” Lan Zhan confirmed. “Nie Huaisang was the one who sent off his brother’s soul, and he thanks you for it.”

“And—” Wei Ying swallowed hard. “—Jin Guangyao?”

“Dead.” Lan Zhan said quietly. “He was executed about three days after the incident.”

“Oh.”

They didn’t say much after that, each immersed in their own thoughts. But Lan Zhan’s hand was warm and heavy and alive on his thigh, and his belly was full of warm food. Wei Ying was content.

He allowed Lan Zhan to dress him, gently pulling his arms through the sleeves and smoothing out the wrinkles.

“Wei Ying looks stunning.” Lan Zhan murmured, wrapping his hands around Wei Ying’s waist.

When he looked in the mirror, he couldn’t help but agree with Lan Zhan. The outfit was rich, but not over the top. His inner robes were blood red, and they felt like heaven against his skin. His outer robe was pitch black, but when he moved and the light hit them right, he could see silvery bamboo leaves flashing around his hem.

“Did you get this?” Wei Ying whispered. “It’s so nice.”

“Mn. I would like to take you out.”

Wei Ying turned around, resisting the urge to laugh. “Like, on a date, Lan Zhan? On an actual date? After we’ve kissed? How scandalous.”

“Wei Ying.” Lan Zhan reprimanded, but his stern visage was ruined by his ears pinkening slightly. Wei Ying laughed and kissed the shell of his ear, smirking in victory when they turned bright red.

“Lan *er-gege*. Are you going to spoil me?” Wei Ying blinked slowly.

“Mn.”

“Lan Zhan! I can’t believe you, you know! You’ve changed. Alright alright, where do you think we should go, then?”

Lan Zhan gave him a meaningful look. “I do not think we covered all of Lotus Pier back then. I would like to see where Wei Ying grew up.”

When they stepped out of the portal that Wei Ying conjured, they were standing in the middle of the street, and Lan Zhan had to pull Wei Ying to the side to avoid getting trampled by the crowds. Their rich robes drew a few curious glances, but most of the crowd left them well alone.

Wei Ying flitted from stall to stall, Lan Zhan trailing close behind with his money pouch permanently open. But it felt... off, somehow. Wei Ying paused, a candied lotus seed halfway to his mouth, and smiled.

“Lan Zhan, ah. Is it just me? I feel like I’ve been pulled out of the loop of time.” Wei Ying popped the candy into his mouth and chewed slowly. “Nothing tastes the same. I don’t see any familiar faces. I know Jiang Cheng tried his best, but Lotus Pier isn’t the same; not really.”

“That is okay. Things change.”

“Yeah. Yeah, they do.” Wei Ying held up a lotus seed to Lan Zhan’s lips, and he obediently opened his mouth. “How do you think Xie *da-ge* and Hua *qianbei* have lived like this for hundreds of years?”

“They have each other.”

“That’s true.” Wei Ying turned to look at Lan Zhan. “And I have you.”

Wei Ying didn’t know how they ended up back in Ghost City, but here they were, strolling through the streets of a city that existed in the past and the present, taking the future one step at a time.

The ghosts swarmed Wei Ying and Lan Zhan, chattering ceaselessly and pressing gifts into their hands.

“For you, for you! Friends of Hua *Chengzhu* are always welcome in Ghost City!”

“Wei Ying.” Lan Zhan turned to him during a lull in the crowds. “I will have to go into seclusion soon.”

“How soon is...’soon’?”

Lan Zhan frowned—as in, his eyes softened infinitesimally. “Too soon. I will not—”

“Lan Zhan. What is the seclusion for? Don’t tell me that you got into trouble again.”

“No. But I have neglected my cultivation, and I must continue if I am to catch up to Wei Ying.” Lan Zhan smiles suddenly, and the sight is as shocking as it is beautiful. “I would like

to spend the rest of eternity with you, after all.”

And well, when faced with that smile and those pleading, golden eyes? Wei Ying was a weak, weak ghost. He kissed Lan Zhan goodbye, and walked him to the edge of Ghost City. Every moment was bittersweet, but every time Wei Ying was about to start crying, he reminded himself of their promise.

In every lifetime.

Lan Zhan never lied. He would ascend, but if not, Wei Ying would wait too.

“I have something for you.” Lan Zhan drew out a thin jade pendant, and Wei Ying’s breath caught in his throat. It was a smooth, brilliant green, like the surface of a deep pond, about the length of his hand and two fingers thick. When Wei Ying ran his thumb over the surface, it was cool to the touch.

It took a while, but he recognised the score that was carved into the stone.

He murmured. “Oh, Lan Zhan, you shouldn’t have.”

“Wei Ying trusted me with his ashes. Any gift I have pales in comparison to yours, but I hope that you will accept this.”

Wei Ying is... well. He didn’t know how to react, to be very honest. He wasn’t sure whether to laugh or to cry, but he settled on pressing another kiss to Lan Zhan’s cheek and smiling.

“It’s perfect,” he assured Lan Zhan. “I love anything Lan Zhan gives me. But... What is the song called? You never told me, Lan Zhan.”

“I will tell you when I come out of seclusion.” Lan Zhan had a smug little smile on his lips, and it infuriated Wei Ying. “But Wei Ying is free to guess.”

Later, when Wei Ying was back in his room, he turned over the jade pendant.

Two characters were carved on it, and he pressed his thumb to it, thinking of Lan Zhan.

“Wangxian. Oh, Lan Zhan.” Wei Ying whispered, pressing the jade pendant to his lips.

Chapter 43

Chapter Summary

Mo Xuanyu, Mo Xuanyu... I am so incredibly sad for you omg

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

To his credit, Hua Cheng lasted a total of three days before he caved.

He sought out Wei Ying the first chance he got, finding the ghost seated in the garden, tracing over that jade pendant mindlessly.

"Hua *qianbei* ." Wei Ying greeted quietly, his gaze soft and faraway.

"Wei Ying." Hua Cheng sits down, watching as the brilliantly green jade was turned around, over and over again. It must be warm by now. Hua Cheng wondered if the words would be worn away by the time Lan Wangji finds him again.

"Are you here to ask me what I'm going to do? Ask after me like a concerned parent?"

"If that's what you want.." Hua Cheng shrugged. "I won't pry if you don't want me to. But it would be nice to have somewhere to direct my letters towards, instead of just sending hundreds of butterflies out. It's tiring, you know."

Wei Ying doesn't call him out on his very obvious fake, but visibly relaxes, then slapped at one of the tendrils of darkness that drifted a little too close to Hua Cheng.

A newly formed Ghost King, still grappling with how vast his power had become , Hua Cheng thought with barely restrained glee. Oh, he desperately wanted to know Wei Wuxian's reaction when he found out that he rejected ascension *while unconscious* .

"Stop that. You have to focus! I'm thinking of going back to the Burial Mounds."

Hua Cheng blinked slowly. "The Burial Mounds in Yiling? Why?"

"I have to keep my promise to Mo Xuanyu, don't I? I promised him that I'd bring him back to life, and I will. Don't worry, Hua *qianbei* , I'll still visit you and Xie *da-ge* ."

That was the last that Hua Cheng saw of Wei Ying for six months, but the time wasn't a big deal for him.

No, the visitors were.

Ghost City was on the outskirts of reality, but somehow, people from Wei Wuxian's life decided to use the Ghost City as a transit place. Less than a day after Wei Wuxian left, Hua Cheng got no less than two people dressed in white and gold, demanding to see their "Wei *qianbei*".

"Let us in, already!"

"Jin Ling. Be polite."

Hua Cheng opened the doors when there was a miniscule pause between the knocks, causing the kid in gold to stumble.

"Well? I've let you in, so tell me what you've disturbed me for before I let my ghosts cook you." Hua Cheng drawled, watching as the kid in gold—Jin Ling, was it?—scrambled to his feet, scowling angrily at him.

"We just want to see Wei *qianbei*. After the coffin was opened, there was no sign of him anywhere, and we thought... Hanguang-jun told us he would be here..." The boy in white trailed off uncertainly.

"Wei Wuxian is no longer living with me. He doesn't need me anymore." Hua Cheng explained. "I think you'll have better luck looking for him in Yiling."

"Thank you, Hua *Chengzhu*."

Two days later, he received a short letter, signed off with Wei Ying's name and talking about how they called him the Yiling Patriarch, and Hua Cheng could almost hear Wei Ying's groan at his inability to shake that title. And now, since he was a Ghost King, Hua Cheng sent him an official letter (politely!) needling him about his new title.

He received another letter in a fortnight, a talisman that shimmered with words and projected them into the air when Hua Cheng touched it. Mostly, it was just Wei Ying accusing Hua Cheng of spreading rumours to cement his name, but a good chunk was dedicated to Wei Ying's vague references about his work in the Burial Mounds.

The Burial Mounds had settled, no longer howling and screaming with resentful energy. Hua Cheng hoped that Mo Xuanyu had settled down there. Wei Ying had taken quite a liking to him, and had recently sent for the timid man.

Mo Xuanyu had immediately accepted it, packing some of the equipment that Wei Ying directed him to and waving goodbye to Hua Cheng. He seemed in unusually high spirits, and Hua Cheng wondered what was the cause.

Well, they did deserve to be happy, after all. He turned, going back into Paradise Manor, where Xie Lian was waiting.

Mo Xuanyu was surprised when Wei Wuxian sent for him. Still, he wasn't all that reluctant to go. Don't get him wrong, Ghost City was a really, really nice place, and he'd found a bunch

of lady ghosts who liked to doll him up. It almost reminded him of his mother, who would always let Mo Xuanyu into her makeup bag if he asked.

Still, he missed talking with someone else about... well, everything else. Xie Lian was always busy, and talking with Hua Cheng was always stiff and formal. But Wei Wuxian... well, how bad could it possibly be, right?

Wei Wuxian was...not what he was expecting.

Mo Xuanyu had been prepared for screaming. Crazy laughter, maybe. Or nonsensical rambling, paired with a thirst for insane plans. Wei Wuxian surprised him, sticking a hand out and greeting him cheerfully.

Then he proceeded to drag Mo Xuanyu into a cave where he had evidently set up a workshop, sat him down at a table with some paper and ink, and told him to recreate the array that Mo Xuanyu had used.

Mo Xuanyu learned that Wei Wuxian—no, Wei *qianbei*, as the Yiling- as he had practically coerced him into calling him that—was a skilled cultivator, but he was also a brilliant inventor. Mo Xuanyu had been surprised to learn that some of the staples in nighthunt equipment were created by Wei Wuxian, much to the delight of the inventor.

“It’s true! I made a lot of new things, and I’m currently working on improving them. You can’t really trust these spiritual instruments, and now I have so much time—wait, Xuanyu~”

Oh no. He didn’t like that particular tone.

“Wei *qianbei*, please don’t...”

It had taken him ages to warm up enough to others, so... why was he so at ease with Wei Wuxian? The Yiling Patriarch was nothing like the stories. He was kind, cheerful, dreadfully funny when the situation called for it and dead serious when it was needed.

Mo Xuanyu would be lying if he said he did not have a little crush on the man. But he was a ghost, and soon, he’d be back in his own body. Besides, he recognised the signs of love in the other man.

Mo Xuanyu loved stories, when he was alive, and he used to love it when his mother would tell him stories of true love, of finding a lovely maiden and settling down. It was only after her death, after everything, that he allowed himself to rewrite those stories, so that he could imagine a dashing young man for himself.

But he had no such fate for himself now. His name had been permanently besmirched, and it’d be lucky if anyone *wanted* to talk to him after all that. Even when he left the Burial Mounds to pick up supplies for Wei Wuxian, he wore a large hat with a black veil that the Ghost King somehow had on him.

And so, after a fortnight of gathering his courage, Mo Xuanyu finally plucked up the courage to ask about Wei *qianbei*’s love life.

“Huh? You want to know if I have anyone I like?” Wei Wuxian barely looked up from his work. “Why do you ask? Oh~ Is A-Yu a hopeless romantic at heart? Hm?”

Mo Xuanyu wanted to die again. Wei Wuxian had seen through him in an instant. His distress must have shown on his face, because Wei Wuxian laughed it off. His hands didn’t stop writing, but his eyes had a faraway gaze in his eyes.

“I do have someone I love. Actually, we found out recently that our feelings were reciprocated. Strange, isn’t it? He’s loved me for close to two decades now, and I… well, I suppose I did too, but I was just too blind to see it.”

“What is he like, Wei *qianbei* ?” Mo Xuanyu asked, still grinding ink for him.

“People will say that he’s cold and impersonal, but that’s not true. You just have to know how to get him to talk. And he can convey what he wants to say in three words, so why bother using more words? I can understand him just fine, even when he says my name.” Wei Wuxian huffed, crossing out a line of words and restarting. He nodded with thanks when Mo Xuanyu passed him a new stack of paper, and silence resumed.

“A-Yu, you mustn’t rush love, you know. I know it may seem hopeless now, but I promise you that you’ll find someone you love.” Wei Wuxian winked cheekily. “Trust a ghost’s king’s intuition!”

“Wei *qianbei* , I don’t think love is a Ghost King’s area of expertise.”

“Ah? Aiya, don’t be such a killjoy, Xuanyu! Okay, I’m done for today, let’s go out, shall we? I think a new noodle shop opened recently…”

Yes, living with Wei Wuxian was not a bad choice at all.

“Excuse me—”

Mo Xuanyu turned, and he recognised piercing eyes, golden robes and a loud voice before he remembered.

He whimpered, his mind going completely blank. What was it that his mother had told him?

Smile, A-Yu. You look better when you smile.

Shakily, he offered the Lanling Jin kid a weak smile, and that was when he realised that he was not alone. Gusu Lan disciples were with him; two of them, and for some strange reason, the Ghost General.

Then—horrors upon horrors—the Jin kid frowned, recognition sparking in his eyes. “Wei Wuxian?”

Mo Xuanyu could barely manage a word. “What?”

“Jin Ling. That isn’t Wei *qianbei* . I know.” One of the disciples in white bowed to him, and Mo Xuanyu was so shocked that he just...stood there. “Mo *qianbei* , could we see Wei—my A-die?”

“A-die?” Mo Xuanyu asked faintly.

“Are you going deaf as well? Isn’t insanity enough, huh?”

Mo Xuanyu flinched. He... he didn’t need to be reminded of that.

“Jin Ling.” Wei Wuxian’s voice was calm, and when he passed Mo Xuanyu, he dropped the hat with the veil over his head, giving him a physical shield. Perhaps Jin Ling didn’t mean to be mean. But children were sometimes the most cruel ones, he had learned.

Mo Xuanyu huddled in a corner of Demon Slumbering Palace, twisting the veil between his fingers and counting each of his harsh breaths, scraping roughly against his lungs like iron blades.

He thought he would be able to get away from all of this. All of... the claims of insanity and the rumours. He should have known.

Mo Xuanyu laughed to himself, wiping away his tears. “Okay, Xuanyu. Remember: smile. Everything will be okay.”

“Hey! Uhh...Mo—shushu?”

Mo Xuanyu’s head jerked up. Shushu? No one had called him that before.

Jin Ling was wandering the halls, looking around for him. Why?

“Shushu. I came to apologise. I shouldn’t have said all those things, I—Wei Wuxian told me. Not—not everything, but enough. I know ghosts can’t really eat, but... I know Wei Wuxian still likes to eat sometimes. So I got you some meat buns.”

“Oh.” Mo Xuanyu whispered, and Jin Ling jumped violently.

“Oh heavens, I literally—! Here.” Jin Ling shoved a bundle into his hands, and the smell of spiced meat buns wafted out. It smelt heavenly, but the taste was muted.

“Thank you.”

Jin Ling got an odd look on his face. “Wei Wuxian always told me that you should always say two things, no matter how embarrassing it is. ‘I’m sorry’ and ‘thank you’. So...I’m sorry.”

Mo Xuanyu smiled—genuinely this time. Then, he got an idea. Slowly, he spread his arms. “That’s okay. Come give shushu—no, nevermind. I overstepped, forgive—”

Jin Ling barreled into his chest, and Mo Xuanyu gasped quietly. Oh.

Oh.

When he was alive, he thought there was no use in living. But now, when he is dead, he sees it now. A thousand tiny things. Meat buns. Warm hugs. Jin Ling.

He's learning how to live. Slowly, but surely.

He wonders if his mother would be proud.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter: the epilogue.

The Good Part.

Chapter Summary

Whew! This fic was quite a big project, but I enjoyed every second of it :D

While the main story is finished, I still will be adding on extra scenes that I've written that never made it into the main story (I swear I've said something about no director's cuts... time to eat my own words with chilli sauce)!

In the meanwhile, please do check out my newest fic, Sunrise! It's under the same pseud, and once again, I thank you for reading this fic! Thanks for sticking all the way with me, heehee

Two weeks later saw Mo Xuanyu lying in the middle of an array, spread out like a starfish while his body—lovingly mended by Wen Qing, the Ghost City's doctor—lay in a smaller circle, intricate red loops drawn on the ground to connect both soul and body.

“Are you ready?” Wei Wuxian asked softly. “Last chance if you want to stay dead. You can say no, you know.”

“No, Wei *qianbei*. I—I want to.” Mo Xuanyu took a deep breath. “Thank you for this chance.”

Wei Wuxian's mouth flapped open, before he snapped it shut and shook his head.

“Aiya, there's no need to thank me. I should be the one getting on my knees and kowtowing.”

And to Mo Xuanyu's horror, he did just that. He would have gotten up if not for Wei Wuxian's stern instructions to remain in place.

“Wei *qianbei* !” Mo Xuanyu shouted. “You—I shouldn't—you mustn't!”

“Okay, okay, time for the ritual now.” Wei Wuxian got up from his kneeling position and shuffled to the edge of the array, sending rhythmic pulses of yin—not resentful, it was completely purified now—energy into the array.

The magic rushed over Mo Xuanyu's body, sinking deep into the cuts that were left by the soul sacrificing ritual that he had performed, healing his soul and leaving only thin, glimmering lines. Through the hazy black mist, he thought he saw Wei Wuxian cry.

“Goodbye, Mo Xuanyu.”

He saw white.

His senses returned to him slowly. First, he was aware of a ringing in his ears, then the bright light shifted into portions of light and not-light. He groaned, and his throat vibrated with the sounds.

A cool rim was pressed to his lips, and Mo Xuanyu swallowed roughly. The warm, salty taste of broth coated in tongue, and he savoured the richness of the meat.

“Hey, hey don’t cry. I know it gets overwhelming, but you don’t have to cry, Mo Xuanyu. You’re alive now. That’s what matters.” A soft voice murmured, sounding like it came from the end of a very long tunnel.

Mo Xuanyu sleeps. Being alive was a tiring, wretched thing. But his bedsheets were soft, and the soup that he was fed was the perfect combination of spice and sweetness and nostalgia.

Perhaps Wei Wuxian had influenced his body.

The first time—well, second time now—he opened his eyes, he was immediately engulfed by a blur of gold.

“*Shushu!*” Jin Ling wails—like, actually ugly cries—into his robes. “I thought you would never wake up!”

Automatically, Mo Xuanyu’s arms go around Jin Ling, and it surprised him. It was just so... natural. Like his arms were meant to hold his nephew.

“Hey, I made the array. Have some faith in me!” Wei Wuxian circled Mo Xuanyu, poking and prodding at him before declaring him fit for activity.

“What are you going to do now, *shushu*?”

“Uhm... I guess stay—”

“Absolutely not.” Wei Wuxian said.

“You’re coming home with me.” Jin Ling cut in.

The two of them looked at each other in surprise before Jin Ling allowed Wei Wuxian to speak first.

“You can’t stay with me forever, Xuanyu.” Wei Wuxian said gently. “You have a whole life ahead of you now, and it would be unfair of me to ask you to throw all that away for me.”

“But I want to.” Mo Xuanyu said softly. “You were so kind to me. I know my family, Jin Ling, but Wei qianbei didn’t have to do what he did. But he still did it anyway. He gave me a chance.”

“Listen to me *shushu*. The best thing you can do right now is come back and become a super strong cultivator. Then, you can come back and cry into Wei Wuxian’s shoulder or whatever.” Jin Ling frowned. “I just... it’s lonely in Golden Carp Tower.”

Mo Xuanyu gaped silently. Of course. Jin Ling was likely the youngest sect leader ever to have been elected. He would need help, and a familiar face nearby.

“You... You want me?” Mo Xuanyu said faintly.

Jin Ling rolled his eyes. “Obviously. Why else would I ask you?”

“You should go with him, A-Yu. You can’t live on a mountain of corpses forever.”

“But why? Wei *qianbei*, I—” Mo Xuanyu cuts himself off, because Wei Wuxian is looking at him with the most bittersweet smile he has ever seen on someone.

“Because I’m dead, A-Yu.” Wei Wuxian says simply. “I’m dead, and you’re not. And you cannot—will not—spend your life with the dead. I forbid it.”

And they felt it. The Ghost King’s will, spreading outwards from where he stood, influencing the Burial Mounds. The wards changed, ever so slightly. It would be difficult for Mo Xuanyu to come back now, if he left.

And it scared him, to know that this thrilled him. Wei Wuxian cared for him. Truly, genuinely cared for him. So Mo Xuanyu hugs him.

“You were more of a father to me in these four weeks than Jin Guangshan ever was.” Mo Xuanyu whispers, because it’s true. Wei Wuxian was a wonderful friend, confidant and parent. He feels the ghost stiffen, then a cold hand pressed itself to his head and pulled him in tighter.

“I don’t think there’s much competition in that department, A-Yu.” Wei Wuxian’s voice sounded choked, and his breath hitched when Jin Ling joined the hug.

“You idiot. Just take the damn praise. Jiujiu was right; you’d rather die than admit you did something good.” Jin Ling’s voice was muffled, but it sounded suspiciously shaky as well. “Will we still see you?”

“Of course. This humble Ghost King is at your service, Sect Leader Jin.” Wei Wuxian untangled himself from the group hug, bowing deeper than was needed towards Jin Ling.

“Oh my god, get up, *jiujiu*.” Jin Ling looked mortified, but secretly pleased. “If you attend all of my birthday parties, I’ll forgive you.”

Wei Wuxian looked up, misty-eyed and full of wonder. “I’ll bring presents.”

“Obviously.”

That day, Mo Xuanyu steps out from a place of death—but not despair, never despair—alive and well. He steps out, taking a breath of fresh air and feeling it rattle in his lungs.

Yes, he was alive.

— Years Later —

“This tale is one that is fraught with tragedy and love. It begins when the towering pines were nothing more than a squirrel’s secret hoard. It tells of a place, far off in the mountains, where the characters of this story spent their teenage years.”

Appreciative murmurs start up, some from the women who practically swoon at the heartrending tale of the two lovers. Mostly the women swoon.

“They were lovers from the start, one fated to fall and one fated to rise. Their first meeting was across a battlefield. Swords clashed, gazes intensified, and they found themselves in each other!”

Wei Ying snorted quietly, swirling his wine in his cup. This was the fifth story today that went something like ‘oh tragic lovers separated by fate’. It was getting kind of boring, and Wei Ying wondered if he could somehow spread rumours to change up the stories a little.

Just to spice things up a little.

He got up, brushing off his robes and leaving the payment for his drinks and a generous tip, then headed to the closest Light Bearing Immortal temple—which is to say, about two streets away. He wanted to be able to give incense to him after all, that’s why he commissioned a temple to be built so close to one of his teleportation arrays.

He stepped over the threshold, smiling slightly at the warmth that enveloped him. It felt like he was coming home. Incense was being lit, prayers were being murmured. Wei Ying lit two sticks of incense and knelt, a smile hanging crookedly on his face.

“Lan Zhan, I don’t know if you still remember me? Maybe not, it’s been... oh, about twenty years now. I lose count easily. Did you know, Hua *qianbei* and Xie *da-ge* waited eight hundred years for each other?” Wei Ying laughed quietly. “Lan Zhan~ are you ignoring me? Is it because I’m not a god? Are you busy?”

He looked up, at the statue hewn from marble, a calm and serene face carved from stone. He missed Lan Zhan and his minute expression changes. It always pleased Wei Ying when he accurately guessed Lan Zhan’s feelings and he was rewarded with a slight upturn of his lips.

Ah, his chest ached so.

Wei Ying stuck the incense into the pot and stood, pressing his palms together. “Lan Zhan, my Lan Zhan. I’ve done it. This is the good part now, right? You must have worked hard, cultivating until you became a god. My prayer is for you to take care of yourself. If you don’t, I’ll go up to heaven myself and make you.”

Wei Ying turned, but he felt the presence in the temple warm and intensify. His breath hitched, and he turned around rapidly.

There was no one else in this place.

And yet.

And yet he hoped.

He held his breath, and if he were alive, his heart would be slamming itself against its cage, desperate to be let out.

“Wei Ying.”

Oh. He recognises that voice.

Slowly, Wei Ying turns. He turns slowly, like the moon circling the earth. He turns like he is afraid of startling him—though who is him, he isn’t sure.

Lan Zhan is there. Dressed in snow white silks, a heavenly halo dripping gold around his hair, his beautiful, *beautiful* Lan Zhan-

“Lan Zhan.” Wei Ying chokes. His body does not listen to him, but Lan Zhan hears his heart.

Warm arms wrap around him, and Wei Ying collapses, folding into himself. Into Lan Zhan, until god and ghost are indiscernible, until he hopes their robes can melt together into greys and pinks, like pink peonies against black lines of poetry.

“Wei Ying.” Lan Zhan murmured, his voice oddly choked. A hand brushes against the back of his head, and he grabs onto Lan Zhan’s likely expensive robes. A small, hysterical part of his brain laughs at the juxtaposition; silk against cotton, gold against onyx, purity against sin. But that part is quickly silenced by Lan Zhan’s lips against his, replaced by a glittering clarity.

Wei Ying sighs against Lan Zhan’s lips, whispering, “Kissing in a temple, Lan Zhan? How scandalous.”

“Mn.” Lan Zhan breaks the kiss for air, despite neither of them really needing to breathe anymore. Old habits die hard, and Wei Ying was planning how to get another kiss when Lan Zhan’s response filtered through.

“You can’t say ‘Mn’ to that, Lan Zhan.”

Lan Zhan tilts his head—adorable as ever, Wei Ying thinks through a soft, golden fog—and a small crease appears between his eyebrows.

“My temple. I can kiss Wei Ying here.”

“Then, Hanguang-jun. This humble ghost king will offer another kiss to you.” Wei Ying laughed at Lan Zhan’s face, leaning in for another kiss.

“Wei Ying...”

He never knew his name could sound like home, coming from his lips. Yet there it was, a spoken declaration of love wrapped in his name.

“Lan Zhan.”

End Notes

I rambled a little too long, didn't I? Too bad, I'll ramble some more, haHA! Ah, I jest, I jest. All I want to say is thank you for picking this fic to read! That's it! And have a great day~~

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